Sirach 19:13–17 and 27:16–21

1. Introduction

Chapters 5 and 6 discuss three pericopes from the central portion of the book: Sir 19:13–17; 22:19–26; 27:16–21. Developing the sapiential theme of the right and wrong uses of speech, all three passages warn of dangers to friendship: failure to reprove a friend to his face (19:13–17); slandering a friend behind his back (22:19–26); and revealing a friend’s secrets (27:16–21). This chapter will consider the two shorter pericopes, 19:13–17 and 27:16–21.

Unfortunately, discoveries from the Cairo Genizah and the Dead Sea area have failed to yield the Hebrew original for these three pericopes. However, I provide a reconstructed Hebrew text for them on the basis of the ancient versions.

2. Sirach 19:13–17

Sirach 19:13–17, a didactic poem of five bicola, inculcates the need to reprove a friend for wrongdoing. This passage, therefore, concerns the right use of the tongue, by contrast with the previous passage on misuse of the tongue (19:4–12).

a. Delimitation

The clearest feature indicating the unity of Sir 19:13–17 is the fourfold repetition of the key word ἐλεγχεῖν (= ἐλεγχεν, “reprove”) at the start of...
verses 13, 14, 15, 17. In addition, there is an alternating pattern with בְּרִית ( = φίλος, “friend”) in verses 13a and 15a, and בְּרִי ( = πλησίον, “companion,” “neighbor”) in verses 14a and 17a. Thus, the whole of 19:13–17 considers reproof of one’s friends.

While the preceding passage (19:4–12) concerns gossip (a misuse of speech), the present text (19:13–17) is about reproof (a right use of speech). Indeed, 19:4–12 uses the term “word” (δύος) four times (vv. 7, 10, 11, 12), by contrast with only one occurrence (v. 15) in 19:13–17.

The following passage (19:20–24) discusses the relationship among wisdom, the fear of God, and the law. The term “wisdom” (σοφία), which last appeared in 18:28, occurs four times (19:20 [bis], 22, 23). A double inclusio marks off the passage; just as 19:20 uses “fear” (φόβος) and “the law” (νόμος), so 19:24 employs “reverent” (ευφόβος) and “the law” (νόμος).

b. Retroverted Text of Sirach 19:13–17

I

הוֹדַךְ אוֹדוּ שֶׁאֵר לָא יבָשַׁדְתָּ
 הבשׁת שֶׁאֵר לָא יִצְרֶהוּ 13

וְזָכוּ בְּרִית שֶׁאֵר לָא יִצְרֶהוּ 14

II

לְכָל בְּרִית כִּי יֵשֵׁמֵמוֹ רַבָּה
 הִשֵּׁמִים לָא מַלְבַּשִּׁי 15

יִמְּרַשׁ כִּי לָא מַלְבַּשִּׁי 16

וְזָכוּ בְּרִית שֶׁאֵר לָא יִצְרֶהוּ 17

k. Text-Critical Notes

This reconstruction is based mainly on G, while also taking into account S and L. Note that GA lacks 19:13b–14a (homoioarchton).

13a: So G and L; S has “your friend” here and in 19:15a.

13b–b: Compare S: “so that he may not do anything evil.” G has “perhaps he did not do [it].”

14c: So Gc and L; S has “your neighbor,” while Gb reads, “the friend.”

---

4 Cf. ibid., 64–76, on Sir 19:6–12. The context section (below) explains why I regard 19:4 as the beginning of the unit.

5 Here I ignore 19:18–19 (a gloss found only in GII), on which see ibid., 81–83.

14d–d: Following S; G has “perhaps he did not say [it].”
15e–f: So G; S has “how many times empty slander happens.”
15f–f: So most MSS of G; S and G^248^ read, “Let not your heart believe.”
16g–g: So most MSS of G; G^248^ adds “with a word,” while L specifies “with his tongue.” S, however, reads, “For there is one who sins.”
16h: So S; G and L read, “from the soul,” with a similar meaning (as 4:17 illustrates).
16i–i: So G; S^ALW^ reads, “and there is one who stumbles, but not with his tongue.”
17j: So G^SV^ and L; G^BAC^ reads, “your neighbor.” S, however, has “a wicked person,” from הָאָשָּׁר (“evil,” “an evil person”).
17k–k: So G; S^LM^ reads, “who has wronged many.” 7
17l–l: So G; S has “and do not believe every word,” by analogy with 19:15b. 8

After 19:17 GII has two further bicola:

18 Fear of the Lord is the origin of acceptability,
    and wisdom procures love from him.
19 Knowledge of the Lord’s commands is an education in life,
    and those who do what is pleasing to him will harvest fruit from
    the tree of immortality.

Since these two bicola are absent from GI, S, and L, I regard them as a later gloss and hence do not discuss them here.

d. Translation

I

13 Reprove a friend so that he may not do it,
    and if he has done it, lest he do it again.

---


8 Winter (“The Origins of Ben Sira in Syriac,” 498) observes that in eight verses S removes or alters references to the “law” or “commandments” found in G (9:15b, 17b, 20b; 28:6b; 29:11a; 34:8a; 38:34d; 39:8b). These changes are probably due to a Christian translator or reviser.
14 Reprove a companion so that he may not say it,  
and if he has said it, lest he repeat it.

II

15 Reprove a friend because often there is malicious talk,  
but do not believe every word.

16 There is one who stumbles but not intentionally;  
and who has not sinned with his tongue?

17 Reprove a companion before you become indignant,  
and give place to the law of the Most High.

e. Poetic Analysis

The alternation between בְּרִאָם (“friend,” 19:13a, 15a) and רֵעַ (“companion,” 19:14a, 17a) indicates that the poem consists of two stanzas (19:13–14 and 19:15–17). Both stanzas open with the phrase: “Reprove a friend” (vv. 13a, 15a), while the closing bicolon of both stanzas begins with the phrase: “Reprove a companion” (vv. 14a, 17a).9

The clearest feature unifying the first stanza (19:13–14) is the parallel syntactic structure (... אֲדֹנִי ... אֲדֹנִי ... אֲדֹנִי ... אֲדֹנִי). The parallelism also involves two word-pairs, first בְּרִאָם (“friend”) and רֵעַ (“companion”),10 and second פָּתַח (“do again”) and מָשָׂא (“repeat”). In addition, there is rhyme between the last word of the first colon, מָשָׂא (“he may do,” v. 13a), and the last word of the final colon, מָשָׂא (“he may repeat,” v. 14b).

The sound patterns of the second stanza (19:15–17) add to the poetic effect. Verse 15 exhibits assonance between מִלְלָה (“malicious talk,” v. 15a) and מִלָּה (“word,” v. 15b). In verse 16 rhyme occurs between מָלֹא (“from his heart” = “intentionally”) at the end of verse 16a and מַלְשָׁנָה (“with his tongue”) at the end of verse 16b. Verse 16 contains alliteration of l (5x), while verse 17 exhibits alliteration of t (4x).

f. Context


18:15–19:3: Prudential Warnings\footnote{A twenty-two-line nonalphabetic acrostic in G; S adds two extra bicola in 18:21. The address τέκνον ("child") in 18:15 indicates the start of a new pericope, as often (e.g., 2:1; 3:17; 6:18) but not always (cf. 3:12; 4:1). The end of the pericope is apparent from the allusion to death ("rottenness and worms," 19:3a; compare "worms," 7:17b), as well as from the use of a concluding refrain in 19:3b that is the same as 6:4a.}

19:4–17: Misuse and Proper Use of Speech\footnote{I regard 19:4–17 as a unit, along with Haspecker (Gottesfurcht bei Jesus Sirach, 159), Fuß ("Tradition und Komposition," 125), and Segal ( amat ἱλαρότος, 115). The end of the pericope recapitulates its opening motifs; thus, “believe” (πιστεύειν, 19:15b) corresponds to “trusting” (ἐμπιστεύοντα, 19:4a), “from his heart” (μετάφρασε, 19:16a; cf. S) parallels “in heart” (καρδιά, 19:4a), and “has … sinned” (ἀμαρτάνει, 19:16b) matches “sinning” (ἀμαρτάνειν, 19:4b).}

19:20–20:31: Wisdom and Folly in Word and Deed\footnote{Note the inclusio of σοφία ("wisdom," 19:20a) and σοφίαν ("wisdom," 20:31b).}

21:1–21: Sin Contrasted with Wisdom\footnote{A twenty-three-line nonalphabetic acrostic (Skehan and Di Lella, Wisdom of Ben Sira, 74); whereas vv. 1–10 concern sin, vv. 11–21 are about wisdom. On 21:11–21, see A. J. Desečar, La sabiduría y la necedad en Sirac 21–22 (Rome: Edizioni Francescane, 1970), 21–44.}

22:19–26: Preserving Friendship

22:27–23:27: Control of the Tongue and of Bodily Desires

Much of 18:15–23:27 concerns wise speaking, which is contrasted with the utterances of the fool (cf. 20:13).

**iii. Relationship of 19:13–17 with 19:4–12.** Sirach 19:4–12, concerning sins of the tongue, is the antithesis of 19:13–17, which discusses a right use for the tongue (reproving a friend). Not only does 19:15–16 return to the motifs of 19:4 (belief/trust; heart; sin); 19:13–14 also develops the motifs of 19:7–8 (“repeat” and “friend”).


---


19 In S the verb “repeat” also occurs in 19:6, while seemingly G has misread ἐπιθυμεῖν ("one who repeats") as ἐπιθυμιάς ("one who hates"); see Skehan and Di Lella, Wisdom of Ben Sira, 289. Moreover, 19:6a in G28 contains γλώσσῃ ("with the tongue"), which matches the mention of the tongue in 19:16b.


22 Haspecker, Gottesfurcht bei Jesus Sirach, 52 n. 7.
v. Relationship of 19:13–17 with 22:27–23:27. Ben Sira often juxtaposes word and deed (3:8a; 37:16a); thus, in 19:13–14 reproof for a friend’s faulty action immediately precedes reproof for a companion’s sinful speech. This juxtaposition occurs several times in Ben Sira.

Deed (sins of passion): 6:2–4; 18:30–19:3; 23:2–6; 23:16–27

Through such juxtapositions the sage wishes to stress that the wise person will be self-controlled in both action and speech.

g. Exegesis

i. Stanza 1: The Benefit of Reproof (19:13–14). The first stanza opens emphatically with the key word of the whole pericope, “reprove” (19:13a, 14a, 15a, 17a); the imperative verb ἐλέγξων in G represents the Hebrew יָּקָט (cf. Sir 31:31a H). The fundamental text underlying Sir 19:13–17 is Lev 19:17, whence Ben Sira borrows the verb “reprove.”

Leviticus 19:17, one of the prescriptions of the Holiness Code, legislates for a matter that is hard to regulate by law:

24 I. de la Potterie (La Vérité dans Saint Jean, I [AnBib 73; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1977], 399–404) distinguishes six meanings of the verb ἐλέγξων: make an inquiry; cross-examine; expose; refute; reprove; punish. Here the meaning “reprove” fits best.
25 In his article “עִבְרֵי (TDOT 6:64–71), G. Mayer distinguishes between two main senses of the Hebrew root, a forensic usage (65–68) and a pedagogical usage (68–70). Thus, the verb יָּקָט has two basic meanings in the MT: in an educational or social context it means “reprove,” “correct” (e.g., Lev 19:17; Prov 3:12; 24:25), while in a judicial context it denotes “decide,” “adjudicate,” “judge,” “convict” (e.g., Isa 2:4; 11:3, 4).
26 In addition, the words עָבֹד (“one who loves” = “friend,” Sir 19:13a, 15a) and לֵבֶד (“companion,” 19:14a, 17a) may reflect the language of Lev 19:18, which reads:爱你 as yourself”). On Lev 19:18, see Mathys, Liebe deinen Nächsten wie dich selbst, passim. On the importance of Lev 19 for the Hellenistic-Jewish author Pseudo-Phocylides, see P. W. van der Horst, The Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides (SVTP 4; Leiden: Brill, 1978), 66–67.
27 Cf. Kugel’s comment on Lev 19:15–18: “All of the things enjoined are very difficult to enforce simply by legal fiat—they ultimately depend on the heart of each individual and a desire to comply even when, sometimes, non-compliance is undetectable” (“On Hidden Hatred,” 44).
You shall not hate your brother in your heart; you shall surely reprove your compatriot, so that you will not incur guilt because of him.28

Leviticus 19:17 forms part of a section of apodictic laws concerning interpersonal behavior (Lev 19:11–18).29 The link between reproof and love, spelled out in Lev 19:17–18 (“you shall surely reprove…. you shall love”), is part of Israel’s wisdom tradition. Proverbs 3:12 sees God’s reproof as an expression of his parental love: “Yahweh reproves the one whom he loves” (y'ki/hw:hy' bh'a'y< rv,a} ta; cf. Prov 13:24; Sir 18:13). Closer to Sir 19:13 are the aphorisms of Prov 27:5–6:

Better a revealed reproof than a hidden love.
Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but abundant are the kisses of an enemy.30

Furthermore, Prov 9:8 observes that “love” is the wise student’s reaction to reproof (cf. Ps 141:5; Prov 15:12). Just as Israel’s wisdom tradition often situates reproof in the context of “loving” (bha), so too Ben Sira insists that love of a “friend” (bhe/a) may entail reproving him. In Sir 19:13, therefore, the sage has skillfully combined the teaching of Lev 19:17 with Prov 27:5–6, thereby applying the Levitical prescription to the context of friendship.31

28 This understanding of wyl; (“because of him”) is supported by the rendering of Lev 19:17 G, δι’ αὐτον.
30 From Prov 27:5–6 Ben Sira derived two features of his teaching on friendship: “reproof” (tj'k'/T; cf. Sir 19:13–17) and faithfulness (µynIm;a'n< = “faithful”; cf. Sir 6:14–16).
31 Leviticus 19:17 is also applied to the context of friendship in 4 Macc 2:13, saying that, with the help of reason, the law (o νόμου) “is master over the intimacy of friends, reproving [εξελεγχων] them because of wickedness.”
Elsewhere Ben Sira speaks of the value and necessity of reproof. Sirach 20:2–3, for instance, declares: “How much finer to reprove [€λέγει] than to be angry, and the one confessing will be prevented from disgrace”32 (because he has heeded the reproof). By way of contrast, using a phrase from Prov 12:1b (חניך, “one who hates reproof”), Sir 21:6a warns: “One who hates reproof is in a sinner’s path.” Similarly, Sir 32:17 (H/B/Bm) observes that “a lawless person will turn aside reproofs” (אֵלֶּה גְּויות מוֹסֵס), refusing to listen to criticism.

Although Sir 19:13–17 interprets Leviticus’s idea of fraternal correction in a moral and educational sense, as befits wisdom literature,33 Lev 19:17b also came to be interpreted in a judicial sense during the Second Temple period. Such a legal understanding clearly occurs in the Damascus Document found in the Cairo Genizah and paralleled among the Qumran finds.34 L. H. Schiffman speaks of a “law of reproof” in CD 9.2–8, a law that the community derived from Lev 19:17–18.35 Schiffman further explains how the community combined the prohibition of grudges (Lev 19:18) with the admonition to reprove (Lev 19:17):

Lev 19:18 has been interpreted here to mean that a member who sees an offense must immediately perform the required “reproof.” If he does not, but later makes an accusation, he violates Lev 19:18 by “bearing a grudge” and “taking vengeance.”36

---

32 20:3 G has €λαττώσεως (“indigence”), presupposing ἁστατός (“lack”), but ἀστατός can also mean “disgrace”; see N. M. Bronznick, “An Unrecognized Denotation of the Verb ḤSR in Ben-Sira and Rabbinic Hebrew,” HAR 9 (1985): 91–105, esp. 100.

33 Kugel (“On Hidden Hatred,” 45) notes how the stipulation of reproof in Lev 19:17 reflects the world of Israelite wisdom.

34 For a translation of the Qumran fragments of the Damascus Document, see García Martínez, Dead Sea Scrolls Translated, 47–71. 4Q269 10.1–3 contains part of CD 9.5–8; 4Q270 10 iii 17–20 has part of CD 9.2–6, while 5Q12 1.2 provides CD 9.7–8 (ibid., 61, 65, 70). For the Hebrew text, see J. M. Baumgarten et al., Qumran Cave 4.13: The Damascus Document (4Q266–4Q273) (DJD 18; Oxford: Clarendon, 1996). On the use of Lev 19:17–18 in CD (and also in 1QS), see Mathys, Liebe deinen Nächsten wie dich selbst, 120–23.

35 L. H. Schiffman, Sectarian Law in the Dead Sea Scrolls (BJS 33; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983), 89; note that CD 7.2 also alludes to the Levitical “law of reproof.”

36 Ibid. The text of CD 9.2–4, 6–8, according to the translation of García Martínez (Dead Sea Scrolls Translated, 40) reads: “And what it says: [Lev 19:18]: ‘Do not avenge yourself or bear resentment against the sons of your people’: everyone of those who entered the covenant who brings an accusation against his fellow, unless it is with reproach שָׁפָרְשֵׁ עַזְּעֵזֶה before witnesses, or who brings it when
A New Testament parallel to CD 9.2–8, Matt 18:15–17, also employs the verb “reprove” (ἐλέγχων [Matt 18:15], exactly as in Sir 19:13, 14, 15, 17 G), in conjunction with the legal requirement of two or three witnesses (cf. Deut 19:15).

The Qumran community took seriously the “law of reproof” in Lev 19:17. The Rule of the Community prescribes reproof as part of the way of life for members (1QS 5.24–6.1):

Each should reproach [ الثلاثة] his fellow in truth, in meekness and in compassionate love for the man. [Blank] No-one should speak to his brother in anger or muttering, … and he should not detest him [ الثلاثة] [in the stubbornness] of his heart, but instead reproach him [ الثلاثة] that day so as not to incur a sin for his fault. And in addition, no-one should raise a matter against his fellow in front of the Many unless it is with reproof [ الثلاثة] in the presence of witnesses.37

Also parallel to Sir 19:13–17 and dependent on Lev 19:17 is chapter 6 of the Testament of Gad.38 In particular, Gad’s exhortatory words

he is angry, or he tells it to his elders so that they despise him, he is ‘the one who avenges himself and bears resentment’ … If he kept silent about him from one day to the other, or accused him of a capital offence, he has witnessed against himself, for he did not fulfill the commandment of God which tells him: [Lev 19:17] ‘You shall reproach your fellow so as not to incur sin because of him.’”

37 Ibid., 9. One fragmentary Qumran text (4Q477) lists persons who had been reproved at the community meeting according to the sect’s procedure for judicial discipline. Thus, 4Q477 i 1 ii 3–5 records: “[They reproached] Johanan, son of Mata[thias because he] … was quick for anger, … and has the evil eye, and also has a boastful spirit…. And they reproached [ الثلاثة] Hananiah Notos” (ibid., 90). In her article “4Q477: The Rebukes by the Overseer” (JJS 45 [1994]: 111–22), E. Eshel notes: “Apparently, this text preserves remnants of a legal record, compiled by the sect’s Overseer (רבם), of those members who were rebuked after committing a sin” (111). Note that some of Eshel’s readings of the text differ from those of García Martínez. See further E. Eshel, “4QRebukes Reported by the Overseer,” in Qumran Cave 4.26: Cryptic Texts and Miscellanea, Part 1 (ed. S. J. Pfann et al.; DJD 36; Oxford, Clarendon, 2000), 474–83, esp. 481.

38 Although the present form of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs shows the influence of Christian redaction, its origins are Jewish, possibly from the second century B.C.E.; J. H. Ulrichsen dates the basic text of the work to 200–175 B.C.E. (Die Grundschrift der Testamente der Zwölf Patriarchen [Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1995], 339). Nothing in ch. 6 of the Testament of Gad demands a Christian source; indeed, the similarities to Ben Sira (especially to Sir 19:8–9, 13–17; 20:2–3; 28:1–2) support Ulrichsen’s suggested date for the original of this passage.
concerning loving reproof (T. Gad 6.3) are in harmony with Ben Sira’s sentiments:

Love one another from the heart, and if a man sins against you, speak to him in peace, after having cast away the poison of hatred; and do not hold guile in your soul. And if he confesses and repents, forgive him.39

In Greek culture also, candid reproof was viewed as a mark of true friendship. Thus, the Greeks referred to the παρφησία (“frankness” or “boldness”) with which the genuine friend offered criticism, by contrast with the fine words uttered by the flatterer who spoke only to please (cf. Aristotle, Eth. nic. 10.3.11). Indeed, in his letter To Antipater 4, Isocrates offers a commendation of his pupil Diodotus for his “frankness … which would rightly be regarded as the surest indication of devotion to his friends.”40

According to my reconstructed text of Sir 19:13a, which echoes the wording of S (“so that he may not do anything evil”), the sage advocates reproving a friend before he actually sins. However, G understands the phrase differently, that is, as introducing an element of doubt whether the friend actually did the wrong deed. A similar divergence between S and G occurs in 19:14a (concerning speech).

In Sir 19:14a (and 19:17a) the sage urges: “Reprove your companion” (ἐλέγχων τὸν πλησίον). While for the sake of variety Ben Sira may have used the synonym ἄν ("companion") instead of ἄνοι (“friend”), this reading also corresponds more exactly with the form of Lev 19:17b found in other texts. Whereas the MT urges, “You shall surely reprove your compatriot” (ὦ, ὡ, πλησίον), the quotation in CD 9.7–8 reads, “You shall surely reprove your companion” (ὦ, ὡ, ὡ, πλησίον).41 Similarly, Lev 19:17b G states: “With a reproof you shall reprove your companion” (τὸν πλησίον σου). Thus, it is evident that the reading ὡ, ὡ (“your neighbor”) for Lev 19:17b represents an early tradition.

---


41 Note the plene spelling of the singular noun, as in 2 Sam 12:11.

42 G uses this circumlocution to render the Hebrew infinitive absolute.
Elsewhere, out of a concern for shame, Ben Sira moderates the demand of Lev 19:17b, by warning against choosing the wrong time to reprove a companion. Thus, in 20:1a he advises: “There is a rebuke [ɛlɛγχος] that is untimely” (nrsv). In particular, the middle of a banquet is an inappropriate time (31:31–32a Ἴγ): “At a banquet of wine do not reprove a companion [ι ], and do not grieve him when he is joyful. Do not say to him a disgraceful word.”

Human reproof of companions parallels God’s reproving of humanity, an aspect of the divine mercy: “A human being’s mercy is toward his neighbor, but the Lord’s mercy is toward all humanity, reproving [ɛλεγχος và] and disciplining and teaching” (18:13 G). Thus, Ben Sira teaches that mercy, whether human or divine, involves an element of discipline and reproof.43

The verb “say” (אמר) in 19:14a corresponds to the verb “do” (행) in 19:13a. The same linkage occurs in Sir 3:8: “In speech and in deed [טומא] honor your father.”44 Middendorp observes that the connection between “word” and “deed” appears also in Xenophon’s Memorabilia.45 However, the biblical tradition already attests to this connection in the first chapter of Genesis.46

In Sir 19:14 the sage teaches that reproof will stop a companion from saying unhelpful things in the first place, or else from repeating them once they have been said. Already Prov 17:9 warned of the harm done by continually repeating such negative words: “One who seeks friendship [ἀλλάζει] covers over transgression, but one who repeats a matter [ἐστὶ] alienates an associate.” Similarly, Sir 19:6–7 S teaches: “One who repeats a matter is lacking in sense. Never repeat a matter, and no one will disgrace you.” Moreover, 42:1 ἩΜ urges: “[Be ashamed] of repeating a matter [μαθαίνει] that you may have heard.”

43 On the analogy between human friendship and God’s relationship to his servants, see Irwin, “Fear of God,” 557–58.

44 Moreover, Sir 37:16a Ἰδ states: “The origin of every work [or deed] is speech” (λαμάντας καὶ μαθητεύει), possibly an allusion to God’s creation of the world in Gen 1.

45 Middendorp (Die Stellung Jesu Ben Siras, 13) refers to Mem. 2.3.8, 15, 17; 2.10.6; 3.11.10. Memorabilia 3.11.10 declares: “That your friends [φίλοι] give you satisfaction, you convince them, I know, not by words but by deeds [ό ν λόγῳ ἀλλ’ ἐφαν]” (Marchant, trans., Xenophon, 245). See also Sanders, Ben Sira and Demotic Wisdom, 43–44.

46 See, for example, Gen 1:6–7: “And God said [איאו], ‘Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters…. ’ And God made [ע] the dome.” Note that the verbs in Gen 1:6–7 G (εἶπεν: “he said”; ἐποίησεν: “he made”) are identical with those at the end of Sir 19:13a, 14a G.
ii. Stanza 2: The Need for Reproof (19:15–17). “Malicious talk” (אָפָב, representing διαβολή in 51:2)\(^{47}\) is something against which wisdom teachers warn. For example, Prov 10:18b declares, “The one who brings forth malicious talk [אָפָב] is a fool,” while Prov 25:10b, warning against revealing the confidence of another person, says, “The malicious talk about you (אָפָב) will not cease.”

Living in a society with a strong culture of honor and shame, Ben Sira is concerned that his students avoid any actions that might give rise to such disgrace.\(^{48}\) According to 26:5c G “the malicious talk of a city” (διαβολή πόλεως) is worse than death, while in 42:11c HBM the sage urges his students to be vigilant over a daughter lest her misconduct make them “the malicious talk of the city” (אָפָב). Similarly, a person should follow suitable mourning customs “on account of malicious talk” (χάριν διαβολής, 38:17c G).\(^{49}\) According to 28:9b G, a sinner’s “enmity” (or “malicious talk,” διαβολήν)\(^{50}\) disrupts friendship. Hence, in 19:15a Ben Sira counsels his audience to warn a friend against any conduct that might engender “malicious talk” from an enemy. The friend is to be reproved so that he may avoid suffering from “malicious talk,” true but unwelcome talk arising from his misbehavior.\(^{51}\)

In 19:15b the sage warns against being gullible about reports of a friend’s supposed misbehavior. Ben Sira’s thought here is comparable to Qoh 7:21: “To all the words that people will say, do not give your

---

\(^{47}\) The Hebrew term אָפָב may refer to an “evil report,” talk that is true but unfavorable (Gen 37:2; Num 13:32; 14:36; 37; Sir 46:7 H\(^{8}\)). The cognate Greek verb διαβάλλω means “make a hostile accusation against [someone],” either with false and slanderous charges (4 Macc 4:1) or on the basis of the truth (Dan 3:8).


\(^{49}\) In 38:17, H\(^{8}\) reads וּמְנַעַת ("tears") for אָפָב ("malicious talk").

\(^{50}\) Note that S and L read “enmity”; see the brief discussion of 28:9 in the appendix. The cognate noun διαβολής has the meaning “enemy” in LXX Esth 7:4; 8:1.

\(^{51}\) This interpretation agrees with the sense of אָפָב as “evil report” (Gen 37:2; Num 13:32; 14:36, 37; Sir 46:7), where the report is true but negative. It also corresponds to the normal explanatory meaning of אָפָב (and γὰρ) as “for,” “because.” The more widely held interpretation of 19:15a sees διαβολή as a “slander” or “false accusation,” which should therefore not be believed (19:15b); cf. Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 293; Segal, *בר וסנהדשא יסודא גלעגיעה*, 116. In this interpretation the verse is understood as follows: “Reprove a friend, though often there is slander, and [hence] do not believe every word.” For the meaning “though” for אָפָב, see Jer 14:12; Zech 8:6; Ps 37:24; compare also Joüon, 2:641 (§171b).
attention.”52 In warning the student against being so gullible as to believe everything said by others, Sir 19:15b seems also to draw on Prov 14:15a: “A simpleton will believe every word” (אָמה לְשׁוֹנָ֝הוּ).53 This wariness about believing what others say fits in with Ben Sira’s “ethics of caution.” The sage recommends this caution for a variety of human relationships, not just toward an enemy, but also toward a hated wife and toward a prince who holds long and testing conversations.54 In 19:15b Ben Sira’s warning against being gullible takes up the theme of 19:4a, the opening statement of 19:4–17: “One who quickly trusts is light-headed” (ὁ ταχῶς ἐμπιστεύων κούφος καρδία).55 Instead of opening with the expected command “reprove,” Sir 19:16 digresses with a general statement that suggests two reasons for moderation in one’s zeal to reprove a friend. Verse 16a is a reminder that some offenses may be unintentional, while verse 16b recalls that no one is guiltless (not even the person reproving).

Sirach 19:16a begins with “there is” (есть), a formula used to record an insight (often paradoxical or unexpected) from a general observation of the world and human behavior (cf. Prov 10:24; 12:18; 14:12; 16:25; 20:15). For instance, Prov 13:7 declares: “There is [אָֽם] one who pretends to be rich but has nothing, and [there is] one who pretends to be poor but has great wealth.” A similar format occurs in Qoh 8:14: “There are [אָֽם] righteous people who get what the wicked deserve for their action, and there are [אָֽם] wicked people who get what the righteous deserve for their action.” Such a format also has parallels in late Egyptian wisdom literature, such as P. Insinger 9.16–17: “There is he who has not been taught, yet he knows how to instruct another.

52 Note that the following verse in Ben Sira (Sir 19:16) has a parallel in the thought of the preceding verse in Qoheleth (Qoh 7:20). Ben Sira may be aware of Qoheleth, though this is denied by F. J. Backhaus, “Qohelet und Sirach,” BN 69 (1993): 32–55; and C. F. Whitley, Koheleth: His Language and Thought (BZAW 148; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1979), 122–46. See further J. Marböck, “Kohelet und Sirach: Eine vielschichtige Beziehung,” in Das Buch Kohelet: Studien zur Struktur, Geschichte, Rezeption und Theologie (ed. L. Schwienhorst-Schönberger; BZAW 254; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), 275–301.

53 Note also the advice of the prophet Micah: אָֽם לְשׁוֹנָ֝הוּ (“Do not believe a companion,” Mic 7:5).


55 Behind this statement I suspect a Hebrew wordplay between בֹּּֽפ meaning “quick” (hence ταχῶς, “quickly”) and בֹּּֽפ in the sense of “light” (κούφος).
There is he who knows the instruction, yet he does not know how to live by it.  

Within Sir 19:20–20:31 there are twenty-four cola beginning ἔστιν (= ἦς, “there is”) or οὐκ ἔστιν (= ἦς, “there is not”), for instance, 20:6 H⁵ teaches: “There is [ἐν] one who is silent without an answer, and there is [ἐν] one who is silent because he has recognized the time.” The same format also occurs in some of Ben Sira’s friendship pericopes (6:8–10; 37:1).

The Hebrew verb “slip” (= “be tripped,” nip’al of הֲלָכָה) denotes a physical fall in Sir 13:23 H⁴ and 32:20 H⁶⁵⁸. In 15:12, however, the causative of the verb (hip’ill of הֲלָכָה) refers to a moral lapse: “Do not say, ‘My transgression is from God,’ … lest you say, ‘It was he who made me slip’” (15:11a, 12a H⁴⁵⁸). In the grandson’s translation, the verb ὦλοςθήσεν (“slip”) usually refers to a moral lapse (such as with the tongue, cf. 19:16b). For example, 14:1a G says, “Happy the man who did not slip [οὐκ ὕλοςθησεν] with his mouth,”⁵⁹ while 28:26a G urges care with the tongue: “Be careful, lest somehow you slip [ὁλίςθησθε] with it.”

The phrase “not intentionally” means literally “from his heart” (לב) in Hebrew (following S), whereas G reads “from the soul” (ἀπὸ ψυχῆς). The same Hebrew idiom occurs in Lam 3:33; although the destruction of Jerusalem appears to be God’s punishment, “he has not willingly [לב] caused affliction.”

Just as Sir 19:16 connects the heart and the tongue, so too other sapi- ential texts point out the need to control both the tongue and the heart. Psalm 39 describes the psalmist’s effort to avoid sinning with his tongue (39:1), an effort that caused his heart to grow hot within him (39:4). Ben Sira’s prayer for self-control (Sir 22:27–23:6) takes up the thought of Ps 39 in praying for discipline of the tongue (22:27d) and of the heart (23:2b). Most similar to 19:16b is the sage’s question in 22:27 G: “Who

---

56 AEL 3:192. For other examples (usually in couplets), see P. Insinger 2.14–15; 5.3–4, 20–23; 7.13–14; 8.8–10; 11.13–14; 19.1–2; 21.3–4; 23.15–16; 32.22–24; Ankhsheshonq 26.3–7. Moreover, Ankhsheshonq 21.1–12 has a series of sayings beginning “There is no.…”


58 On the root לָכָה (“to trip”), see my exegesis of Sir 13:23d in ch 4.

59 However, 14:1a H⁴ reads: אָשִׁרָא אֵזִית לֹא נָעַם בִּיָּהוּ (“Happy the human being whose mouth has not caused him grief”). Compare also 4Q525 14 ii 26–27: “Be very careful against a slip of the tongue … lest you be condemned by your (own) lips” (García Martínez, Dead Sea Scrolls Translated, 397). Besides verbal self-discipline, 4Q525 counsels a disciplined approach to eating and drinking, and the fragmentary text of 4Q525 25.4 seems to quote Sir 18:33; see Puech, Qumran Cave 4.18, 164–65.
[τίς] will place a guard upon my mouth and an effective seal on my lips, that I may not fall on account of them, and my tongue [γλῶσσα] may not destroy me?"

The concern about sin in Sir 19:16b already appears in the Levitical command to reprove a neighbor; Lev 19:17c says that by means of reproof “you will not incur guilt [or sin, ἁμαρτία] because of him.” Sirach 19:16b implies that because everyone sometimes sins with the tongue and needs to be reproved, no one can claim moral superiority over a companion. In a balanced friendship, each friend will both give and receive reproof; indeed, this may be one aspect of the saying: “Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another” (Prov 27:17 NRSV).

Ancient Israelite sapienial teaching often (as in Sir 19:16b) makes use of the rhetorical question ὃς ("who?")}, where the implied answer is “no one.”60 Sometimes, however, the question “who?” implies a more specific answer, “no one except God.”61

Ben Sira has much to say on the sins of the tongue (5:9–6:1; 19:4–12; 20:16–26; 22:27–23:15; 28:8–26). A survey of his sayings on the subject will illustrate his outlook, which often connects the tongue with tripping and falling (cf. 14:1; 21:7; 28:26). At the heart of the sage’s first discourse on the tongue (5:9–6:1) stands the aphorism of 5:13:

 Glory and dishonor are in the power of a speaker,
 and the tongue of a human being is his downfall.62

So too, Sir 20:18a declares, ὀλίσθημα ἀπὸ ἐδάφους μᾶλλον ἢ ἀπὸ γλῶσσῆς ("A slip due to the pavement rather than due to the tongue"),63 while Sir 28:18 asserts: “Many have fallen by the mouth of the sword, but not like those having fallen on account of the tongue.” In a similar fashion,

60 E.g., Prov 30:4; Sir 10:29; 12:13; 14:5; 36:31; 42:25; 43:3; 46:3; 19.


62 So H, but correcting ἄλλος with HC; for ἀκριβή as “speaker,” see S. A comparable aphorism is present in the Egyptian Instruction of Any 7.9: “A man may be ruined by his tongue” (AEL 2:140).

63 Compare Ankhsheshonq 10.7: “You may trip over your foot in the house of a great man; you should not trip over your tongue” (ibid., 3:167). Middendorp notes a parallel saying attributed to the third-century B.C.E. Stoic philosopher Zeno of Citium in Diogenes Laertius’s Lives of the Ancient Philosophers 7.26: “Better to slip with the foot than with the tongue” (Die Stellung Jesu ben Siras, 20).
the macarism of 25:8 Hc teaches: אשתר רוח נפש בלשון (“Happy the one who has not fallen by the tongue”). The sage affirms the preeminence of the tongue succinctly in his list of the “four branches” (37:18a Hc) that grow up in the “heart” (or “mind”): “[They are] good and evil, and life and death—and ruling over them completely is the tongue” (37:18bc Hc).

The idea that all human beings have sinned, presumed in Sir 19:16b, is widespread in Israel’s wisdom literature.64 Thus, Qoh 7:20 declares: “There is no righteous human being on earth who will do good and will not sin” (אשה ידיעת).65 Similarly, using the same device of the rhetorical question as in Sir 19:16b, Prov 20:9 asks: “Who may say, ‘I have purified my heart, I am clean from my sin’?”66 In the New Testament, too, the Letter of James echoes these sapiential themes in its discussion of the tongue: “For we all stumble in many ways. If someone does not stumble in speech, he is a perfect man, able to restrain even his whole body” (Jas 3:2).67

In Sir 19:17a the sage returns to the thought of Lev 19:17–18; instead of bearing a grudge (Lev 19:18) and making angry threats (Lev 19:17), one should reprove a companion. Sirach 19:17a also makes use of the vocabulary of Prov 24:24–25:

One who says to a wicked person, “You are righteous”—peoples will curse him, nations will be indignant at him [ַזדִיקוּת];
but for those who reprove [לִמְדוּד] it will be pleasant, and upon them will come the blessing of prosperity.

In 19:17a Ben Sira has skillfully combined the thought and vocabulary of Lev 19:17–18 and Prov 24:24–25. While Lev 19:17–18 urges reproof instead of anger, Prov 24:24–25 says that failure to reprove will cause a reaction of indignation. Combining and adapting these ideas, Ben Sira

64 For a brief summary of Ben Sira’s teaching on sin, see Skehan and Di Lella, Wisdom of Ben Sira, 81–83; R. E. Murphy, “Sin, Repentance, and Forgiveness in Sirach,” in Egger-Wenzel and Krammer, Der Einzelne und seine Gemeinschaft bei Ben Sira, 261–70, esp. 262–65; Collins, Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age, 80–84.

65 For this idea cf. 1 Kgs 8:46; Pss 14:3; 53:4; 130:3; 143:2; Rom 3:23; 4 Ezra 6:35; 1QH 23.12; Aristotle, [Rhet. Alex.] 36 §1444a.

66 Cf. the similar question (expressing the rarity of virtue) in Sir 31:10cd Hc. “Who was able to turn aside but did not turn aside, or to do evil but was unwilling?”

recommends the fearless honesty of unsentimental friendship: “Reprove
a companion before you become indignant.”

Sirach 19:17b concludes the pericope by urging the student to “give
place to the law of the Most High.” The idiom ὑποπληκτεῖσθαι ("give place"),
found in a literal sense in Judg 20:36 ("yield ground"), often has a derived
meaning in Ben Sira (“give an opportunity”). Thus, Sir 38:12a H8 advises:
ὑποπληκτεῖσθαι ὁ Ἰδων ἐρωτάσθαι ("And also to the doc¬tor give place"). Moreover,
when urging generosity to someone poor, Sir 4:5 H8 explains: “You will not
give him an opportunity to curse you” (καὶ μὴ ἐπεράξῃ Ἰσραήλ ἔτερον
τὸν ἄνθρωπον). The nuance of the “law of the Most High” (ὁ Ἰδων ἑξήκοντα
τεσσαράκοντα, equivalent to νόμος ὁ Ἰσραήλ), depends on the context in the sage’s work.70 In 23:23 G the phrase denotes the commandment against adultery (Exod 20:14; Lev
20:10; Deut 5:18; 22:22), while in 44:20 G it refers to God’s commands to
Abraham, especially the law of circumcision (Gen 17:9–14). In 41:4b H8 the “law of the Most High” that all must die appears to be an allusion to
Gen 2:17. Hence it is reasonable to understand Sir 19:17b as a reference to
another pentateuchal command, the law of reproof in Lev 19:17–18.71
Indeed, a comparable allusion to Lev 19:17–18 seems to be present in Sir
28:7 G: “Remember the commandments, and do not be angry with your
neighbor, and the covenant of the Most High, and overlook wrongdoing.” Thus, Ben Sira teaches that instead of burning with anger, one
should calmly reprove an erring friend in accordance with the provisions of
Lev 19.

h. Summary

Both the Wisdom of Ben Sira and certain Qumran texts take seriously
the injunction of Lev 19:17 to reprove a fellow Israelite for wrongdoing.
However, whereas the Qumran texts (CD 9:2–8; 1QS 5:24–6.1; 4Q477)72

---

68 My retroversion of Sir 19:17a follows Isa 66:14 G, where ἀπελέγω ("threaten")
69 The text of G is somewhat different here; see Skehan and Di Lella, Wisdom of
Ben Sira, 163. On the idiom in Sir 13:22d see the previous chapter above.
70 On the phrase in Sir 9:15b G, see ch. 3 above. The same phrase in 38:34 G has
a sapiential nuance; compare 9:14–15; 19:20; 21:11, which all connect wisdom with
the law.
71 So Skehan and Di Lella, Wisdom of Ben Sira, 294; and Schnabel, Law and
Wisdom from Ben Sira to Paul, 46. However, Beentjes (“Full Wisdom Is Fear of the
Lord,” 33) understands the phrase as a reference to the whole law, in view of the
following verse (19:20).
72 CD 9.2–8 (from the Cairo Genizah) is almost completely preserved at
Qumran in composite form (4Q270; 4Q269; 5Q12).
speak of reproof in a judicial context culminating in a community “chapter of faults,” Ben Sira inculcates a private reproof in the context of friendship. The sage warns against excessive reproof, citing three reasons for moderation in this matter: the need to avoid being too gullible, the existence of unintentional offenses, and the fact that everyone commits verbal sins at one time or another. Nevertheless, he suggests that reproof according to the Torah prevents hidden resentments from harming one’s friendships.

3. Sirach 27:16–21

The fifth part of the Wisdom of Ben Sira (24:1–32:13)\textsuperscript{73} contains only one poem dedicated to the theme of friendship, namely, 27:16–21.\textsuperscript{74} However, several other verses in 24:1–32:13 mention the topic briefly (25:1, 9; 28:9; 29:10; 30:3, 6). The second half of the present chapter will study 27:16–21, a didactic poem about the irrevocable harm done to friendship by betraying secrets. Since no Hebrew MS of the pericope is extant,\textsuperscript{75} I offer a reconstructed text based on G and S; the textual notes will explain my retroversions.\textsuperscript{76}

a. Delimitation

The concern of 27:16–21 with friendship distinguishes it from the surrounding material. In 25:13–28:7 \textit{φίλος} (“friend”) occurs only in 27:16b, 17a, while \textit{φιλία} (“friendship”) is present only in 27:18b.

Stylistic features also indicate that 27:16–21 is a separate unit. A prominent \textit{inclusio} exists, whereby the first colon (27:16a) and the last colon (27:21b) both begin with a saying about “one who reveals a confidence.”\textsuperscript{77} A secondary inclusio is also present, since the loss of

\textsuperscript{73} I consider that the sixth part of Ben Sira’s book begins with the sapiential poem in 32:14–33:18; cf. Harvey, “Toward a Degree of Order,” 52–54.

\textsuperscript{74} On the pericope, see O. Kaiser, “Was ein Freund nicht tun darf,” 107–22.

\textsuperscript{75} Kaiser (ibid., 108–9) regards a gloss that follows 31:2ab H\textsuperscript{8} as the Hebrew original of 27:16. However, Skehan and Di Lella (\textit{Wisdom of Ben Sira}, 315–16) point out that the bicolon “is closer … to reflecting the content of 22:22 than that of 27:16.” For the Hebrew text of the gloss, see my footnote on 41:18c in the appendix below.

\textsuperscript{76} For this reconstruction Segal’s text (\textit{ספר ב’ר סירה חלילים}, 167–68) has served as a useful model, although in a number of places I opt for different readings.

\textsuperscript{77} In both cases G employs a participial expression: 27:16a opens with \textit{ὁ ἀποκαλύπτων μυστήρια}, while 27:21b starts with \textit{ὁ δὲ ἀποκαλύφας μυστήρια}; cf. Skehan and Di Lella, \textit{Wisdom of Ben Sira}, 73 (for the secondary \textit{inclusio}, see 358).
“faith” (πίστις, 27:16a) is related to losing hope (verb ἀφηλπισεν, 27:21b).

Besides inclusio, the presence of opening and closing rhyme in my retroverted text also serves to delimit 27:16–21. There is opening rhyme between the second colon (לעבש, 27:16b) and the third (ɘנמ, 27:17a), as well as internal rhyme within 27:16 (המאנא, v. 16a, and סניא, v. 16b).78 Closing internal rhyme exists within 27:21a (הפש and המאה), and there is a further rhyme with the final word of 27:21b (רוֹפָא).

b. Retroverted Text of Sirach 27:16–21

I

ללא קמיא אוהב לעבשא; 16
וֹלֵלָה סדר מאמ佗ָה 17

II

כין שאר י�א איה רח: 18
כין תעבדות לאה לאה דר: 19

III

אל תחרימ ח"ר וחר"חך 20
כין גכ תבכ ימכ: 21

וכלו סדר אפר הרקוח: 21

C. Text-Critical Notes

My reconstruction represents an eclectic text based on G, S, and L.

16a. Singular as S; understood as collective by G and L.
16b. Participle with S; G uses aorist.
16c. So G and L; S presumes לֶעֶבֶש ("like himself"; cf. Sir 7:21; 37:2).
17d. So Hc,79 cf. S. However, most mss of G have στεφξου ("love," cf. L).80

---

78 Both these rhymes occur in Segal’s reconstruction (סאר מביירא השלח, 167).
79 The last word on leaf VI (verso) of Hc (= T–S 12.867) is הסד; see Beentjes, Book of Ben Sira in Hebrew, 99; as well as Di Lella, “Recently Identified Leaves,” 166 (cf. photograph in tab. V). Di Lella suggests the word is the “beginning of another v., perhaps 38,10; see Ms B margin” (167). Since the word follows 36:31 in the anthological ms Hc, and since the edition of Schechter and Taylor (Wisdom of Ben Sira, 17) gives the word in the margin of Hb at the start of 38:10 (where their text has הב, “flee”), the word could be understood as the emphatic imperative הב ("flee"), similar in form to הב ([א], “arise,” Num 10:35, cf. GKC §48k). However,
17e. So G and L, with “if” understood in the Hebrew protasis (as in Sir 6:7a H^A; cf. 1:26 G). S has a third singular verb (S^M: “he has revealed”; S^IW: “he reveals”).

18f. So most MSS of G (τὸν ἔχομεν αὐτῷ, “his enemy”). Instead of ἐνιαυτῷ (“his enemy”), L presupposes ἐναυτῷ (“his friend”). S has “his portion,” from ἀναυτῷ (“his portion”). The reading of S, mnth (“his portion”), was seemingly corrupted into myth (“his dead person”), presumably the origin of τὸν νεκρὸν αὐτῷ (G^157 and Ziegler’s text: “his dead person”) and mortuum [suum] (L^SX: “[his] dead person”).

19^g–^g. S omits this phrase, found in G and L.

20^h–^h. S omits this phrase, which is present in G and L. The hitpa‘el verb (unattested in the MT) is found twice in Sir 13:10 H^A.

---

Smend (Sirach, erklärt, 340), Segal (Sirach, hebräisch und deutsch, 243), and Skehan and Di Lella (Wisdom of Ben Sira, 440) read the word in the text of 38:10 as הָשָׁלֵם (depart) and the marginal word as הָשָׁלֵם (remove,” cf. G and S). Furthermore, in his article ὑπερήφανος ἔρωτας τὸ βίον (Tarbiz 29 [1959–1960]: 313–23, esp. 323), M. Z. Segal proposes that הָשָׁלֵם in H^C belongs to 37:27a, where Ḥ reads יִנָּשֵׁל (test), but this proposal founders on the word’s position in the middle of 37:27a (not at the start of the colon). After reviewing these two suggestions for the placement of the word (37:27a and 38:10a), P. C. Beentjes (“Hermeneutics in the Book of Ben Sira,” EstBib 46 [1988]: 45–60, esp. 57) confesses perplexity in the matter. My suggestion is that הָשָׁלֵם (“test”) in H^C is the first word of 27:17a; for the form, see GKC (Paradigm P, 528) and compare the vocalized pi‘el imperative הָשֵׁל (“change”) in Sir 36:6 H^Bmg (though the qal form “renew” fits the context better there). This suggestion depends on two considerations. First, the imperative in 27:17a corresponds precisely to the imperative form at the start of 27:17a S. Second, it fits in with the anthological series of verses in H^C. Leaf VI of H^C (Schirmann’s second leaf) would then consist of the following verses: 26:2b–3, 13, 15–17; 36:27–31; 27:17a. It is characteristic of H^C to disrupt the standard order of verses, as Beentjes’s table shows (“Hermeneutics,” 58). It is quite possible that Ḥ would have quoted 27:17 (on friendship) as an introduction to the friendship passage in 37:1–6 (which immediately follows 36:27–31), just as 41:16 serves to introduce passages on shame (4:21; 20:22–23; 4:22–23, 30–31) in leaves I and II of H^C. A section on friendship would fit the anthropological theme of Ḥ; cf. C. Camp, “Honor, Shame, and the Hermeneutics of Ben Sira’s MS C,” in Barré, ed., Wisdom, You Are My Sister, 157–71, esp. 160–61.

80 The form הָשָׁלֵם (“test”) may have become orthographically corrupted at an early stage to הָשָׁלֵם (“cover,” “conceal”); hence the reading στέξου (“cover up,” “keep secret”; cf. 8:17b), suggested by Smend (Sirach, hebräisch und deutsch, 246). From στέξου may derive the reading of most MSS of G (στέρξου), as well as the variant στέναξου (“groan,” G^3).

81 Hart, Ecclesiasticus, 169.

82 So Skehan and Di Lella, Wisdom of Ben Sira, 354. Alternatively, τὸν νεκρὸν may perhaps be an inner-Greek dictation error for τὸν ἔχομεν ἀντί.
20i. So S and L. G reads καί (“and”).
20j. So G and S, but S adds “from a net, and like a bird” (an expansion based on Prov 6:5).83
21k-k. So S. G has “it is possible to bind up a wound.”
21l. So S (cf. G); L has maledicti (“of a cursed person”).
21m–m. So G; note that the verb מָלַשׁ in the pi’el means “lose” in 27:21b (cf. Sir 41:2d), but “destroy” in 27:16a. S reads, “but to reveal a secret is despair”; L expands the reading of S.

d. Translation

I

16 One who reveals a confidence destroys faithfulness and will not find a friend for himself.
17 Test a comrade—and remain faithful to him; but if you have revealed a confidence, do not pursue him.

II

18 For like a person destroying his enemy, so you have destroyed the friendship of a companion;
19 and as if you have released a bird from your hand, so you have abandoned a companion and will not catch him.

III

20 Do not pursue him, for he has gone far away, for he has escaped like a gazelle from a trap;
21 because for a wound there is binding-up, and for a quarrel there is reconciliation, but one who reveals a confidence has lost hope.

e. Poetic Analysis

The poem consists of three stanzas (2 + 2 + 2 bicola).84 The first stanza opens with “one who reveals a confidence” and ends with “do

---

84 So Peters, Das Buch Jesus Sirach, 224. The pattern of three stanzas in 27:16–21 (already foreshadowed by the numerical proverb in 26:28) continues with the threefold comparison in 27:18–20 and with the threefold phrase in 27:21. For the pattern of three in 6:5–17, see the poetic analysis of the pericope in ch. 2.
The second stanza consists of two parallel comparisons ("like/as if ... so ..."). The third stanza reverses the pattern of the first by beginning with "do not pursue him" and concluding with a colon starting "one who reveals a confidence."

The clearest poetic feature of 27:16–21 is its chiasm.

A: מָכַל חַוֵּר מַאֲכָר אָמּוֹת (v. 16a)
One who reveals a confidence destroys faithfulness.

B: אל תרדפו (v. 17b)
Do not pursue him.

C: לֹא ... כָל ... ב (v. 18)
Like ..., so ... a companion.

C: כָּל ... כָּל ... ב (v. 19)
As if ..., so ... a companion.

B: אל תרדפו (v. 20a)
Do not pursue him.

A’: מָכַל חַוֵּר אָבָר תִּקּוֹן (v. 21b)
One who reveals a confidence has lost hope.

This chiastic pattern unifies the pericope and adds emphasis to its message.

i. Stanza 1: Warning against Revealing a Confidence (27:16–17). The opening bicolon exhibits alliteration, assonance, and rhyme. Alliteration of m exists in the series of words: מָכַל חַוֵּר מַאֲכָר אָמּוֹת ... יִגְדִּישׁוּ. Verse 16a also has assonance between the two pi’el participles, מָכַל (“one who reveals”) and מַאֲכָר (“destroys”). In addition, the first bicolon exhibits internal rhyme between מָכַל (“faithfulness”) and מַאֲכָר (“will find”). Further rhyme is present between לָבְשֵׁה (“for himself,” v. 16b) and נְמו (“to him,” v. 17a).

Repetition of two verbal roots and one noun also unites the two bicola, according to a chiastic pattern.

מָכַל חַוֵּר מַאֲכָר אָמּוֹת
One who reveals a confidence ... faithfulness.

הָמְנוּ ... וַגְּלֵיתָ חָוֵר
Remain faithful ... but [if] you have revealed a confidence.85

Several words in the first stanza create the structure for the rest of the poem. In accord with the poem’s chiastic pattern, the last colon (27:21b)

echos the first colon (27:16a), while the concluding prohibition of the first stanza (27:17b) is identical with the opening phrase of the last stanza (27:20a). Furthermore, the pattern of verses 16–17 is taken up in verses 19–20.

\[\text{v. 16b, 17b}\]
And he will not find. . . . Do not pursue him.

\[\text{v. 19b, 20a}\]
And you will not catch him. Do not pursue him.

ii. Stanza 2: The Effect of Revealing a Confidence (27:18–19). The second stanza exhibits alliteration, assonance, and rhyme. There is a sixfold alliteration of \(k\) in 27:18–19: \(\text{k} \ldots \text{k} \ldots \text{k} \ldots \text{k} \ldots \text{k} \ldots \text{k}\). Moreover, Ben Sira creates assonance in 27:18 with the roots אב (“be an enemy”), and יב (“be a friend”): יב (“be a friend”). Furthermore, rhyme and assonance are present in the word series in 27:18b–19: יב (“be an enemy”), יב (“be a friend”).

The second stanza also makes use of simile: the two comparisons in 27:18–19 lead into a third comparison in 27:20b. In verse 19 the sage employs proverbial imagery from nature (“as if . . . a bird”), just as in verse 20 he uses another such image (“like a gazelle”).

iii. Stanza 3: The Irreparable Damage Done by Revealing a Confidence (27:20–21). Above we have seen how 27:20a begins with the very same phrase that concluded 27:17b, while 27:21b echoes 27:16a. Rhyme connects the second and third stanzas, since \(\text{ל} \ldots \text{ל} \ldots \text{ל} \ldots \text{ל} \ldots \text{ל} \ldots \text{ל}\) ("do not pursue him," 27:20a) rhymes (and has assonance) with the final phrase of the second stanza, \(\text{ל} \ldots \text{ל} \ldots \text{ל} \ldots \text{ל} \ldots \text{ל} \ldots \text{ל}\) ("and will not catch him," 27:19b). Further rhyme exists in the final bicolon with the series ד (“binding-up”), יב (“for a quarrel”), יב (“hope”); there is also vowel assonance between יב and יב. Moreover, assonance with \(m\) is present in 27:20b–21: מ (“hope”). Additional alliteration with \(\text{s}\) occurs in verses 20b–21: טנ (“as if . . . a bird”). Finally, as in the second stanza there is alliteration with \(k\) in verses 20–21a (note also the vowel assonance): יב (“be an enemy”).

f. Context


\(^86\) This outline is adapted from Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, xv. I consider that the wisdom poem on God’s providence, 32:14–33:18, does not end
24:1–34: Praise of Wisdom
25:1–11: Gifts That Bring Happiness
25:13–26:27: Wicked and Virtuous Women
26:28–27:15: Hazards to Integrity
27:16–28:7: Avoiding Wrath
28:8–26: Quarreling and Evils of the Tongue
29:1–20: Loans, Alms, and Surety
29:21–30:13: Domestic Life
30:14–31:11: A Happy Life
31:12–32:13: Food, Wine, and Banquets

All of part 5 is about applying wisdom to domestic life and avoiding social relationships that would cause unhappiness.

27:16–21: Warning against Revealing Secrets
   *Inclusio*: 27:16a, 21b (see poetic analysis above)

27:22–27: Warning against Mixing with Evildoers
   *Inclusio*: 27:22b G: ὃ εἰδοὺς (“one who knows”)
   27:27b G: οὐ μὴ ἐπιγνωσόω (“he will not know”)

27:28–28:1: Warning against Vengefulness
   *Inclusio*: 27:28b: ἡ ἐκδίκησις (“vengeance”)
   28:1a: ἐκδίκησις (“vengeance”)

28:2–7: Warning against Unforgiveness
   *Inclusio*: 28:2a: ἀφεῖς ἄδικημα (“forgive wrongdoing”)
   28:7b: πάριδε ἄγνοιαν (“overlook ignorance”)

An *inclusio* serves as an envelope for the whole nonalphabetic acrostic: while 27:18b G speaks of “a neighbor’s friendship” (ἡ φίλος τοῦ πλησίου), 28:7a G urges, “Do not be wrathful to a neighbor” (μὴ μηνίσῃς τῷ πλησίῳ). Moreover, the end of the whole poem is marked by the mention of death (28:6) and of the commandments (28:7).


---


95 So the MSS of G; Ziegler substitutes an alternative form μηνίσης.


97 In addition, several features in 27:16–21 G echo themes from 22:19–26 G. Besides the words “friend” (φίλος: 22:20, 21, 22 [bis], 25; 27:16, 17) and “friendship” (φιλία: 22:20; 27:18), terms that are in common include “secret” (μυστήριον;
g. Exegesis

i. Stanza 1: Warning against Revealing a Confidence (27:16–17). Ben Sira’s warning against disclosing confidences is a commonplace of sapiential teaching, with relevance both to ordinary social relationships and to the professional life of civil servants. Comparable sentiments are present in the biblical book of Proverbs (e.g., 16:28; 20:19), in the Aramaic Wisdom of Ahiqar, and elsewhere in Ben Sira. Prov 11:13 teaches:

One who goes about as a talebearer reveals a confidence, but one who is faithful in spirit conceals a matter.

In 27:16 Ben Sira has borrowed from Prov 11:13 both the phrase (‘one who reveals a confidence’) and the root (Prov 11:13: , “faithful in spirit”; Sir 27:16: , “faithfulness”). Proverbs 25:9 also cautions against revealing secrets:

Argue your case with your companion, but do not reveal another’s confidence.

In a similar fashion, Aramaic Ahiqar Saying 53 (line 141) advises: “Do not reveal your secrets before your friends, lest your reputation with them be ruined.” Likewise, Sir 22:22c declares: “One who reveals a confidence is a disgraceful person,” while Sir 42:1


Cf. Kaiser, “Was ein Freund nicht tun darf,” 119. The only occurrence of the phrase (‘one who reveals a confidence’) in the Hebrew mss of Ben Sira is in 15:20cd H; but the couplet, absent from G, is a gloss (so Di Lella, Hebrew Text of Sirach, 133–34). The following Ahiqar quotation is from Lindenberger, Aramaic Proverbs of Ahiqar, 140.

On Sir 22:22, see my text-critical notes in the next chapter. For the Essenes, too, keeping confidences was an important duty. In Ag. Ap. 2.207 Josephus asserts that the law “allows us to conceal nothing from our friends, for there is no friendship without absolute confidence; in the event of subsequent estrangement, it forbids the disclosure of secrets” (Thackeray et al., trans., Josephus, 1:377); he attributes this view to the Essenes in J.W. 2.141. A Qumran sapiential text also
HM lists “exposing any matter of advice” as something deserving shame.\(^{100}\)

The discretion that keeps confidences hidden accords with the silence of the wise person. In 5:11 H\(^b\), for instance, Ben Sira declares: “Be quick to listen, but with patience return an answer.” Similarly, in 20:7 H\(^c\) he teaches: “A wise person will be silent until the right time.” Ultimately, this high valuation of silence echoes the outlook of earlier sapiential and gnomic literature. Amenemope 6.7–8, for example, states: “The truly silent, who keeps apart, he is like a tree grown in a meadow”; by contrast, Theognis 295 asserts: “To a talkative man silence is a sore burden.”\(^{101}\)

Ben Sira’s counsel to “test” a companion (Sir 27:17a H\(^c\), S) echoes his teaching in 6:7a\(^{102}\) and also matches the advice in Egyptian sapiential texts (cf. Ptahhotep 33; P. Insinger 12.15). Once one has tested a companion and found him worthy of friendship, however, one should “remain faithful to him” (27:17a). Here the sage’s teaching accords with the advice of Isocrates in Demon. 24: “Be slow to give your friendship, but when you have given it, strive to make it lasting.”

Fidelity in friendship is an important virtue in Ben Sira’s eyes; indeed, in 6:14–16 he thrice praises “a faithful friend” (\(\text{\textit{h\^{n}m\^{n} b\^{h}m\^{n}}}\)). In financial arrangements too, the sage insists on the need to keep faith with one’s companion (29:3): \(\text{\textit{stere\^{w}son lovgon kai pist\^{w}qhti met\^{a} auj\^{t}ou’}}\) (“Confirm [your] word and keep faith with him”). The sage evidently considers it right to maintain fidelity, both in the matter of a loan (29:3) and within the context of friendship (27:17). By contrast, revealing a confidence is an act of infidelity that disrupts friendship and causes a friend to flee.

\(^{100}\) The verse in H\(^b\) speaks of “exposing any confidence [\(\text{\textit{d\^{s}}}\)] of advice.” In 1:30c G, Ben Sira mentions the fear of having one’s secrets revealed. Compare also P. Insinger 21.15: “He who reveals a secret matter, his house will burn” (AEL 3:202).

\(^{101}\) Cf. AEL 2:151 (Amenemope); Edmonds, trans., Elegy and Iambus, 1:263 (Theognis).

\(^{102}\) Already in 27:7 G the sage has advocated using discussion to test persons: “Before a conversation do not praise a man, for this is the test of human beings.” The following quotation comes from Norlin and van Hook, trans., Isocrates, 1:19.
The first stanza ends with a prohibition, "Do not pursue him," (27:17b), for the damage brought about by a breach of confidence is irreparable. The second stanza will use poetic imagery to elaborate on this damage, before the third stanza returns to the same prohibition, "Do not pursue him" (27:20a).

ii. Stanza 2: The Effect of Revealing a Confidence (27:18–19). According to Ben Sira, destroying one’s friendship with someone by revealing a confidence is a hostile action tantamount to killing an enemy. Here the sage uses a strong antithesis ("enemy" and "friendship") to highlight the negative effect of betraying a confidence. In 12:16 H\(^\text{a}\) Ben Sira uses the word ריבכ ("enemy") of a personal adversary, while elsewhere he employs the term for political foes (36:9 H\(^\text{b}\); 36:12 H\(^\text{b}\text{mg}\); 46:1, 16 H\(^\text{b}\)). Its synonym, שואח ("enemy"), occurs in antithetical parallelism with ריבכ ("friend") in the book of Proverbs (Prov 12:1; 13:24; 14:20; 27:6), and Ben Sira himself also plays on this contrast.\(^{103}\)

In 27:19 the sage shifts from military imagery to an analogy from the world of hunting.\(^{104}\) Verse 19 likens the former companion (whose confidence has been revealed) to a bird released from one’s hand, never to return. At the same time, the imagery of the bird also suggests the swift movement of the secret that, once let out, can never be recaptured.

Ben Sira’s imagery in 27:19 alludes to Prov 6:1–5, which warns against coming under the power of "your companion" (רעים, Prov 6:3) by guaranteeing his loan. Proverbs 6:5 urges:

Save yourself like a gazelle from [his] hand,\(^{105}\) and like a bird from the hand of the fowler.

\(^{103}\) Sir 6:1, 9, 13 H\(^\text{a}\); 12:8 H\(^\text{a}\); 33:6 H\(^\text{g}\). There is also a contrast between שואח ("enemy") and רעים ("companion") in 12:9 H\(^\text{a}\) and 20:23 H\(^\text{c}\).


\(^{105}\) Perhaps the original phrase, shortened by homoioteleuton, was מיר נזר ("from the hand of the hunter"; cf. G and S). Aphorisms based on the behavior of animals were an important part of Israel’s sapiential heritage (cf. Prov 6:6–8; 30:24–31; Job 12:7–9; Sir 13:17–19). Similarly, several animal proverbs occur in Aramaic Ahiqar (e.g., Sayings 7–11, 28, 35–36).
Ben Sira takes up the image of the bird in 27:19a and of the gazelle in 27:20b.\textsuperscript{106} Whereas Proverbs urges the potential guarantor to escape from entering a pledge agreement as swiftly as a bird flies away from a Fowler, Ben Sira states that a companion will be as quick as a bird in fleeing from a former friend who has revealed confidences.\textsuperscript{107}

Here Ben Sira may also echo the Mesopotamian proverbial tradition, which compares spoken words to birds that fly away and can never be recaptured. Thus, Aramaic Ahiqar Saying 15 (line 98) warns: “Above all else, guard your mouth; and [as for] what you have h[eard], be discreet! For a word is a bird [דָּבָחָה], and he who releases it [רַמְשְׁלָה] is a f[ool].”\textsuperscript{108} Just as Ahiqar notes that a bird flies away when released and a word (or saying) once spoken can never be recaptured, so too Ben Sira asserts that a friend whose secret has been disclosed will disappear and never return.\textsuperscript{109}

Elsewhere, however, Ben Sira uses a bird as an image for a friend, as in 22:20: “One who throws a stone at a bird will scare it away, and one who disgraces a friend will make friendship vanish.” In both 27:19 and 22:20 Ben Sira compares a friend to a bird that is scared off, either by a breach of confidentiality (27:19) or by insults (22:20).\textsuperscript{110} A similar image, too, occurs in Theognis 1097–1100: “Now wing I my way like a bird [πτηνὸν] from the flaxen net, escaping an evil man by breaking the tram-mels; and as for thee, thou’st lost my friendship and wilt learn my shrewdness too late.”

The saying of Sir 27:9a G also likens human beings to birds in their social relationships: “Birds will lodge with those that are like them.” In the sage’s thinking, betraying a confidence evidently means that one is not “like” one’s friend and hence undeserving of his friendship.

\textsuperscript{106} By inserting the “bird” alongside the “gazelle” in 27:20, S makes explicit the allusion to Prov 6:5.


\textsuperscript{108} Lindenberger, \textit{Aramaic Proverbs of Ahiqar}, 75; cf. Segal, הָרִירֵי חֵשְׁנָה, 170.

\textsuperscript{109} Likewise, Qoh 10:20cd associates birds with the bringing of secret news: “A bird [נָעָשָׁה] of the sky may bring the message, and a winged creature may recount the matter.” Such sayings involving birds form part of the traditional folk wisdom of many countries; compare the English expression: “A little bird told me.”

\textsuperscript{110} On the links between Sir 27:16–21 and 22:19–26, see the final note in the context section on this pericope; on Sir 22:20, see my exegesis in the next chapter. The following Theognis quotation comes from Edmonds, trans., \textit{Elegy and Iambus}, 1:361.
Because the friend whose confidence has been broken has flown away like a bird, Ben Sira warns at the end of 27:19, “You will not catch him” (יָשָׁבֵר וְעַל הַיָּרֶם). The verb רָאֵה ("hunt," “catch”) refers to the catching of birds in Lam 3:52.

The hunting of birds is often mentioned in ancient Near Eastern literature or depicted in wall paintings and on monuments. Biblical texts also employ imagery from bird hunting (e.g., Qoh 9:12; Ps 91:3). Psalm 124:7 describes deliverance from mortal danger using the imagery of a bird escaping from a trap: "Our life like a bird has escaped from the trap of fowlers”.

Closer to the sage’s text is Amos’s series of questions (Amos 3:3–8), beginning with the mention of two friends walking together (Amos 3:3). In particular, Amos 3:5 asks: “Will a bird [צָהָר] fall into a trap [פָּא] on the earth unless there is a snare for it?” Moreover, the two persons mentioned as meeting in 3:3 are seen to be God and the prophet: “The Lord Yahweh will not do anything unless he has revealed his confidence [עָשָׂר] to his servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7). Whereas Amos asserts that Yahweh reveals his secret to his friends (the prophets) as inevitably as a trap snares a bird (a positive image), Ben Sira declares that revealing the confidence of a friend causes him to escape like a bird (a negative image).

### iii. Stanza 3: The Irreparable Damage Done by Revealing a Confidence (27:20–21).

Having opened the third stanza with the prohibition that concluded the first (“Do not pursue him”), Ben Sira then uses the image of the gazelle to express the futility of trying to catch the betrayed friend. The verb “pursue” (וך) occurs in the context of hunting in 1 Sam 26:20, where Saul’s quest for David is compared to the stalking of a partridge. As in Sir 27:20, the verbal root כָּשֵׁר ("flee") often occurs in the MT (e.g., Lev 26:36; 2 Sam 24:13; 1 Kgs 20:20; Prov 28:1) as the counterpart of כָּשֵׁר ("pursue").
In 27:20 Ben Sira notes that the betrayed friend has gone far away in order to escape from the trap of a disloyal comrade. Whereas Sir 9:13a urges the student, “Keep far [קֶרֶת] from anyone empowered to kill,” who is full of “traps” (מֵאוֹרֹת, 9:13e), 27:20 says that the betrayed friend “has gone far away” (קֶרֶת) in order to flee from the “trap” (מֵאוֹרֹת) of the one who has revealed his secrets.

Just as 27:19a alludes to the bird image found in Prov 6:5b, so Sir 27:20b echoes the image of the gazelle in Prov 6:5a: “Save yourself like a gazelle” (בֵּי הָנָּחָל). Although in ancient times the gazelle was hunted in Israel (Deut 12:22; 14:5; 1 Kgs 5:3), its speed was proverbial (cf. 2 Sam 2:18; 1 Chr 12:9).

The final bicolon (27:21) of the last stanza contrasts the forgivable faults of wounding and disputing with the unforgivable offense of revealing a confidence. This verse exhibits several similarities with Sir 22:22, as a comparison will illustrate:

Because for a wound there is binding-up, and for a quarrel there is reconciliation [רַתָּם],
but one who reveals a confidence [מִכְלָה סֵדוֹר] has lost hope. (27:21)

If you open your mouth against a friend,
do not be terrified, for there is reconciliation [רַתָּם].
One who reveals a confidence [מִכְלָה סֵדוֹר] is a disgraceful person,
and a hidden blow will make friendship vanish. (22:22)

Both texts agree that reconciliation is possible for a verbal dispute in someone’s presence; 27:21a employs the term מַרְפָּא (“quarrel”), while 22:22a speaks of “opening one’s mouth” against a friend. Both texts also agree that betraying secrets in someone’s absence brings an end to the friendship; “one who reveals a confidence has lost hope” (27:21b) and is “a disgraceful person” (22:22c). Whereas a verbal “wound” (סֵדוֹר =

---

114 In Mem. 3.11.8–10 Xenophon employs the comparable imagery of “nets” (δίκτυα) for catching friends; see Marchant, trans., Xenophon, 245.

115 Isaiah 13:14 speaks of the day of Yahweh against Babylon that will cause the people to flee like gazelles: “And one shall be like a gazelle [בֵּי הָנָּחָל] driven out, … and each one will flee [בֵּי הָנָּחָל] to his land.” An Egyptian text, P. Lansing 3.8, speaks of “the desert antelope that lives by running” (AEL 2:169).

116 The above text of 22:22 partly follows S; see the text-critical notes in ch. 6.

117 For Ben Sira, what makes a dispute unforgivable is the betrayal of the person behind his back (22:22cd; 27:21b), whereas a face-to-face disagreement can be healed (27:21a). Thus, the parallelism in 22:22cd is synonymous, while in 27:21ab it is antithetical.
trau'ma in 27:21a G) in a person’s presence can be bandaged and healed,¹¹⁸ a “hidden blow” (רָבָה לָעֲבָרָה, equivalent to “treacherous blow,” πλήγμη δολίας in 22:22d G) in the person’s absence is unforgivable.¹¹⁹

Sirach 27:21a twice describes the same reality: the first time is figurative, employing medical imagery (רָבָה לָעֲבָרָה: “for a wound there is binding-up”), while the second is realistic, explaining the previous imagery (רָבָה לָעֲבָרָה: “for a quarrel there is reconciliation”). In the MT the verb וַיִּקָּחֵץ (“bind up”) sometimes denotes bandaging up a broken limb (Isa 30:26; Ezek 30:21; 34:4, 16) or a brokenhearted person (Isa 61:1; Ps 147:3), while at other times the sense is general, speaking of God’s healing action (Hos 6:1; Job 5:18). In Isa 1:6 the pu’al verb is specifically applied to a “wound” (רָבָה). Moreover, Sir 11:29b H A speaks of the “wounds” caused by a person who betrays the confidences of others: “How many are the wounds of the talebearer [רָבָה רִיבlords]!”

Ben Sira believes that reconciliation is possible in the case of a quarrel, and hence he urges his students, “Forgive your neighbor’s wrongdoing” (28:2a G). Although the term רָבָה (“reconciliation,” “appeasement”) does not occur in the MT,¹²⁰ the equivalent Greek noun διαλλαγή (“reconciliation”) occurs here and in Sir 22:22. While the word רָבָה (“quarrel, dispute”) appears in Gen 13:8 and Num 27:14,¹²¹ a synonym, דָּבָר (“dispute”), often occurs in the MT (e.g., Hos 4:1; Mic 6:2; Prov 15:18) and in Ben Sira (e.g., 6:9; 11:9; 35:25).

The concluding statement in 27:21b underscores the serious consequences of revealing a confidence: the betrayer has “lost [or destroyed] hope” (רָבָה הַרְפָּא). The same idiom occurs in 41:2d, where it is connected with the question of different attitudes toward death.¹²² Thus, 27:16–21 is_____

¹¹⁸ Indeed, a faithful friend may sometimes need to inflict a “wound” (רָבָה) for a good purpose (Prov 27:6).

¹¹⁹ In the MT רָבָה (“wound”) and בָּשָׂם (“blow”) are virtually synonymous (see Isa 1:6; Prov 20:30), while in the LXX the words τραύμα (“wound”) and πλήγμη (“blow”) occur together in Isa 1:6.

¹²⁰ However, the pi’el of רָבָה (“placate,” “appease”) occurs in Job 20:10 and the hitpael (“reconcile oneself”) in 1 Sam 29:4. Note that nouns of a similar form to רָבָה (“reconciliation”) occur in biblical Hebrew, such as רָפָא (“drink”: Prov 3:8) and חָלָם (“payment,” “recompense”: Mic 7:3); see GKC §84bi. In Ben Sira the noun יִשְׂרָאֵל (“testing”) occurs in 33:1 HBEF; 44:20 Hb. In addition, Meribah (ריִבָה) designates the place where the Israelites disputed with God and put him to the test (Exod 17:7; Num 20:13).

¹²¹ In addition, Meribah (ריִבָה) designates the place where the Israelites disputed with God and put him to the test (Exod 17:7; Num 20:13).

another of Ben Sira’s pericopes that end with some kind of reference to death (27:21b).123

Many biblical writers speak generally of a “hope” of deliverance from enemies (e.g., Zech 9:12; Ps 9:19; Lam 3:29) or “hope” (or lack of hope) in the face of death (e.g., Job 7:6; 14:7; Prov 11:7; Sir 7:17; 38:21; 41:2). Ben Sira also uses “hope” (יהוה) to refer to an earthly expectation (11:22; 16:22) or “outcome” (7:13; 12:1). Both the earthly and the mortal aspects of “hope” underlie the use of the term in 27:21b. In the sage’s view, revealing a secret has not only destroyed any earthly expectation of good from the friendship, but also brought the betrayer closer to the realm of death, where there is no hope.

h. Summary

Sirach 27:16–21 aims to inculcate the keeping of confidences by pointing out the damage done by revealing secrets: such breaches of confidence drive friends away irrevocably. The sage emphasizes the delicate nature of friendship using animal imagery (birds and gazelles). Even the wounds caused by quarrels can be healed, whereas revealing secrets puts an end to all friendship.

4. Conclusion

Both pericopes treated in this chapter, drawn from the central segment of Ben Sira’s book, consider how to preserve friendship. The teaching of 19:13–17 is positive: when faced with a friend’s misbehavior, one needs to offer reproof, so that the friend may change. By way of contrast, the advice of 27:16–21 is negative: one should not betray the confidence of a friend, or else the friendship may quickly vanish.

Whereas 19:13–17 concerns the right use of speech (for reproof), 27:16–21 is about the misuse of speech (in revealing secrets). In the central portion of the book, several other discussions of the use of the tongue occur (19:4–12; 20:5–8, 16–20, 24–31; 23:7–15; 28:12–26), as well as the sage’s prayer for discipline in his speech (22:27–23:1).

While anger leads to breaches of God’s commandments, reproof enables one to keep God’s law (19:17). Whereas betraying secrets causes the loss of fidelity and hope in a friendship (27:16, 21), keeping

confidences strengthens faithfulness and encourages hope. In these two pericopes, then, Ben Sira shows how a wise person is able to maintain friendships through proper use of the tongue.