Discovering, Deciphering and Dissenting: Ben Sira's Hebrew Text, 1896-2016

In the summer of 1896, Dr Solomon Schechter, then teaching talmudic and rabbinic literature at the University of Cambridge, told his wife that a discovery he had just made would ensure, as he put it, that 'as long as the Bible lives, my name shall not die'.

That discovery was the Hebrew text of the Book of Ben Sira, long since known only in Greek and Syriac. Now, 120 years later, a conference held at St John's College 12th to14th September 2016, brought together some twenty scholars from around the world, to discuss what had since then been achieved in understanding the importance of this collection of proverbs composed by a Jerusalem sage early in the second century BCE.

How successfully did the early editors of the fragments of Ben Sira from the Cairo Genizah carry out their work? What are the keys to identifying the different manuscripts of this work and the scribes and poets who transmitted them? Do they reflect different approaches to the text? When will scholars have a published text of the whole Book of Ben Sira that provides them with the Hebrew, Greek, Syriac and Latin versions, and all the variant readings to be found on each verse, with accompanying translations into European languages? Where do the language and content of Ben Sira stand in relation to the earlier and later Jewish literature? In what ways are the poetry and imagery of the book impressive? What precisely were the roles of Charles Taylor and Solomon Schechter?

These and other questions were addressed during the conference. In addition, there were exhibitions at the University Library and at St John's College Library. The conference was sponsored by the Faculty of Divinity and St John's College in the University of Cambridge and the ISDCL at the University of Salzburg. James Aitken, Renate Egger-Wenzel and Stefan Reif made the arrangements and will edit the volume of proceedings for the publishers Walter de Gruyter.

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