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The Sunday of Orthodoxy

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In the Book of Sirach, the pursuit of Wisdom has a more personal aspect---perhaps even an implicitly autobiographical aspect---than is the case in the Bible's other Wisdom books. We find in the pages of this work a vast accumulation of inherited teaching, but it is distilled in an living, identified soul, taking on a unique and personal form.

We may contrast Sirach, in this respect, with the Book of Proverbs. Even if we think of Solomon as the "implied author" of Proverbs, this supposition tells us next to nothing about Solomon as a person, because the counsel conveyed in Proverbs is intentionally objective, pretty much bled free---as it were---of the author's subjective evaluations. Even the other collections of aphorisms in Proverbs tell us precious little of Agur or Lemuel's mother.

Indeed, this objective, universal quality of the inherited sapiential aphorism represents its strength. The traditional wise man, as represented by . . . well, let's say Bildad the Shuhite, strives to convey timeless truth, inherited obediently from the past. Even when an individual wise man did contribute some new gem to the accumulated inheritance, it happened anonymously. Bildad's moral reasoning, as portrayed in the Book of Job, was uncomplicated. It possessed simple, straight-forward answers learned from those who went before (Job 8:8). This is precisely the approach we find in the Book of Proverbs.

In Sirach, on the other hand, the ancient aphorisms of Israel's traditional Wisdom receive an infusion of the author's own blood. Their objective validity has passed through his existential assessment and experience, thereby taking on---if the expression is allowed---a personal face. Sirach's teaching demonstrates the wise life of the author himself, so that Wisdom assumes in these pages what I have proposed to call an autobiographical form.

In other words, readers of Sirach are able to approach this writer rather much as he himself approached the "famous men" examined in the final chapters of this book. We seek in his life what he found in theirs. All wise lives are the embodiment of Wisdom.

For this reason, in studying the Book of Sirach, one is prompted to speak of the author's "experience." He certainly seems worthy to be called a "man of experience." Indeed, the idea of "experience" offers an excellent avenue for the study of Sirach.

Prior to considering the "experience" of Sirach, however, it will be useful to reflect on the various senses in which we use this English noun. For instance, by "experience" we often mean an individual event in which someone is involved, or some particular thing that "happens" to somebody. Understood in this way, our English "experience" corresponds to the German *Erlebnis*, which can mean occurrence, adventure, or event.

"Experience" in this concrete, existential sense is often pluralized: we say that a person has had various kinds of experiences, which may include education, travel, work, hazards, social settings, unique opportunities, and so on. If we consider a person's sundry experiences accumulatively, we may be disposed to call such a one "experienced." Having passed through many things, he is thought of as "a man of experience." Indeed, among

the dictionary's various definitions of "experience" we read, "*the sum total of things that have happened to an individual and of his or her past thoughts and feelings.*" Used in this way, the description "experienced" is quantitative.

Sirach can certainly be called "experienced" in a quantitative sense, inasmuch as he exhibits the refinements attendant on advanced education, a breadth of sympathies born of travel and wide exposure to different cultures, a poetic understanding derived from the contemplation of nature, a scientific perspective given by familiarity with technical skills, a patience begotten of suffering, and the mature self-assurance that comes from years of active teaching. In short, Sirach has accumulated many experiences that are brought to bear on his quest of Wisdom.

Our English "experience" also has another meaning, however, a special meaning that resists being pluralized. In fact, experience in this second sense cannot be plural, because it is not quantitative. It indicates, rather, the quality of a person (*qualis*), not the number of things (*quantum*) he has been through and learned from. Experience in this qualitative sense, which corresponds to what the Germans call *Erfahrung*, has to do with the formation of the mature human soul. Such a man is not experienced simply in the sense of having had many experiences, but in the sense of being transformed through the activities of his life. He is now a qualitatively different person; his has become a "wise life."

Experience in this second sense contains both moral and intellectual attributes. The "man of experience," considered as a moral being, is possessed of what we call "character," a Greek word meaning internal shape. The classical notion of character indicates that a man has gradually crafted the contours of his soul through persistent adherence to God's Law, the sustained discipline of temperance and proper restraint, assiduous attention to social and moral duty, and the steady determination of right choices made over the course of many years. By the exercise of prudence, justice, courage, and self-control, this man's soul has been rendered ready for God's gift of Wisdom. This is the "man of experience" in a moral sense.

As an intellectual quality, this kind of experience is expressed in a greater breadth of perspective, which is the product of many years of reflection, thought, and disciplined study---all of this corresponding to the Greek word *paideia*, usually translated as training or education. The importance of *paideia* in Sirach's mind is suggested by the appearance of this word 36 times in his book.

It is essential to reflect that this kind of experience is far more than---and very different from---an accumulation of individual experiences. It is something beyond the harvesting of fruit; it is, rather, the eating and assimilation of that fruit. The gathered fruit is now integral to the man himself.

Understood intellectually, this experience involves the integrative effort of disciplined thinking---even dialectical thinking, by which a man corrects his misunderstandings. It is the product of one's personal informed thought and enlightened interpretation of life. This experience is not abstract but essentially an aspect of history itself. This essential quality of it was well expressed by Hans-Georg Gadamer as "the inner historicity of experience."

The man of experience, as we understand the term here, is largely formed by his choices, but these choices are made within the limitations of specific historical settings---chiefly the

person's complex duties toward his society (as a child, a spouse, a parent, a worker, a leader or teacher, and so on) and the deliberate incorporation of the inherited culture that identifies him.

Principal in this latter respect is a man's reflection on the content of his inherited language. Language, which is obviously essential to the formation of ideas, is also necessary to a person's self-consciousness. Because language is essentially social and traditional, a person acquires both his ideas *and* his self-consciousness within his active relationship---through language---to both his contemporaries and his ancestors. In short, both society and tradition, structured by language, are essential to the experience that leads to Wisdom and self-knowledge. Even the most casual reader of Sirach must observe his persistent ethical attention to the duties imposed by language.

We should make one further consideration about experience: The wise man never becomes a "know it all." He continues to live and learn. In the words of Gadamer, "Genuine experience [*Erfahrung*] is experience of one's own historicity." Wisdom is almost a verb! It is the continued activity of a wise life.

But to say that experience takes place within history---that it neither seeks nor acquires a non-historical perspective---is to assert that the attaining of Wisdom always leaves the room for "more." As long as history lasts, the door of experience is never closed. An active openness to the future---a quiet tinge, at least, of prophecy---lies in the heart of a wise life. Perhaps Sirach's readers will gain some sense of his suspicion that the best was yet to come.

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All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641
Church Office: (773) 777-0749
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

Pastoral Ponderings:
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php