

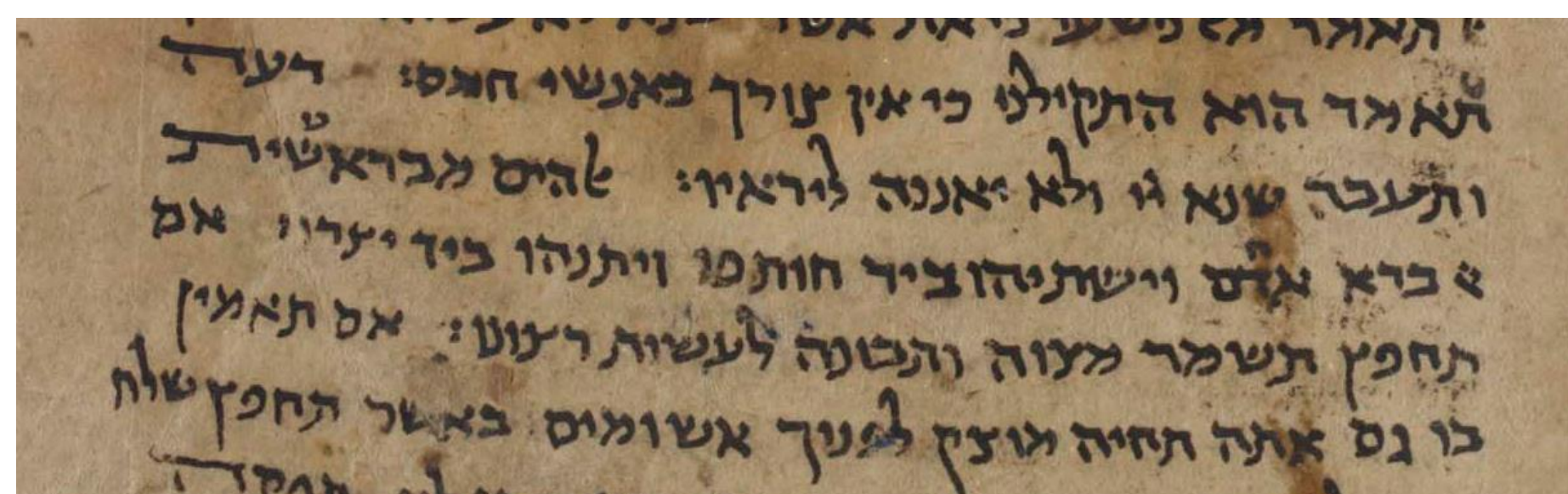


Introduction

Are human beings morally responsible for their actions? Can one be responsible for an action if one could not have chosen otherwise? Is this kind of autonomy compatible with an omniscient, omnipotent God? These questions are important to contemporary discussion, in which the determinism of a physicalistic worldview replaces God's predestination as the point of contention in the debate about free will. This section of the Book of Sirach has been influential in the teaching of the Catholic Church, which states that authentic freedom, while limited by sin, is indeed a human characteristic, a sign of the *Imago Dei* [1]. This contribution seeks to analyze how this passage supports this view.

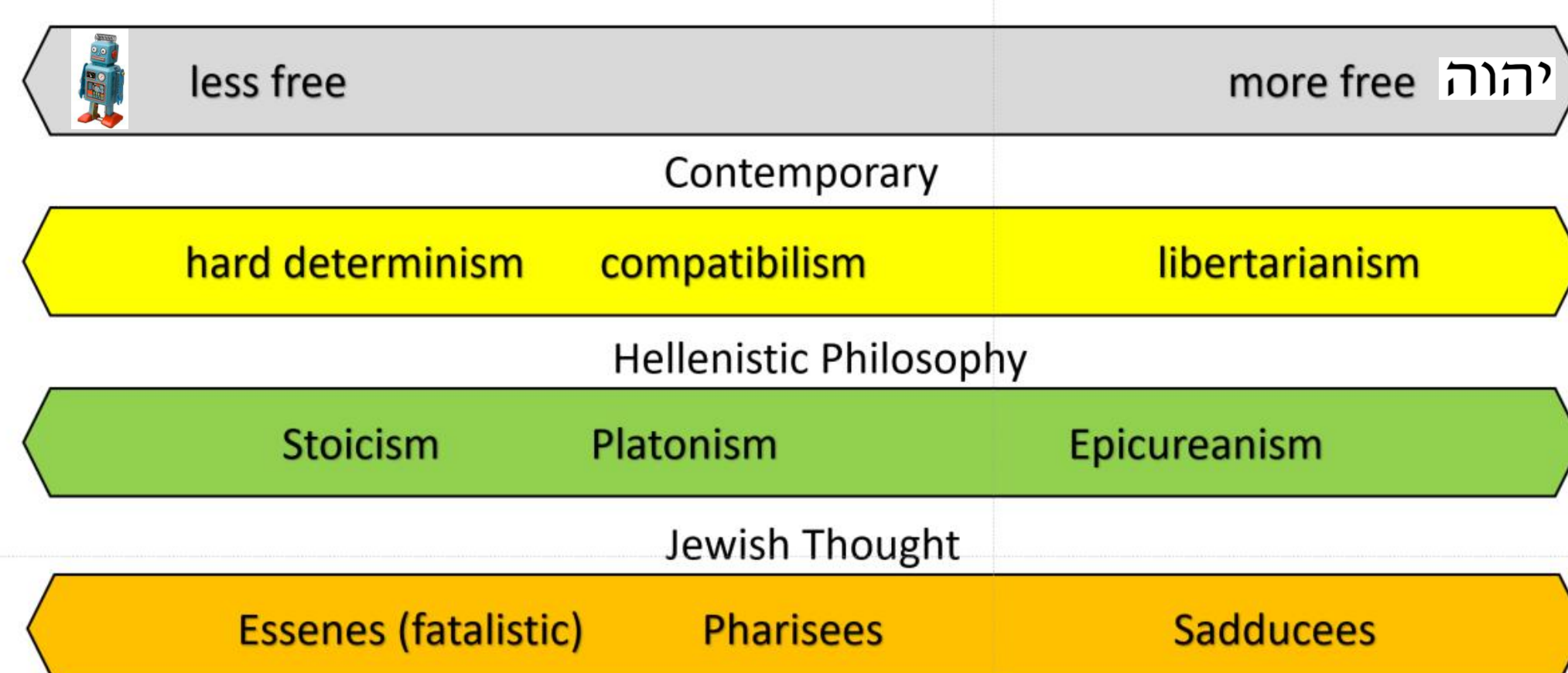
Context

Inspired Author: Jesus son of Eleazar son of Sirach.
Time: Second Temple period, second century BC.
Text: Hebrew original lost. Greek translation by Ben Sirach's grandson. Some ancient fragments found in Masada and Qumran. Medieval Hebrew fragments found in the 19th century [2]:



Several textual variants exist.

Free will concepts [3,4]:



Literary genre: Poetic Wisdom literature.

Thematic section: Does God interact with His creation or is He distant? Is there divine retribution for human action? Is human action free or is every action, including sin, determined by God?

Exegesis

Structure	a	b	Interpretation
Inclusio (opening) Bicolon A1 – B1 (admonition)	11: Do not say, “It was the Lord’s doing that I fell away”;	for he does not do what he hates.	Refutation: God neither directly causes personal sin nor indirectly leads humans into sin. Cf. [5] God is good. He does not act against His nature.
Bicolon A1 – B1 (admonition)	12: Do not say, “It was he who led me astray”;	for he has no need of the sinful.	God can accomplish all that He wills without recourse to evil. Sin is unnecessary.
Bicolon C – C	13: The Lord hates all abominations;	such things are not loved by those who fear him.[6]	God does not force anyone to sin. If God is not responsible for sin, who is? Do humans have moral responsibility?
Bicolon C – C (central statement)	14: It was he who created humankind in the beginning,	and he left them in the power of their own free choice.	‘In the beginning’ is a reference to Genesis ch. 1: Human freedom is a consequence of the <i>imago dei</i>.
Nova Vulgata adds:	[<i>et dedit eum in manum concupiscentiae suae.</i>]	[<i>Adiecit mandata et praecepta sua, et intellegentiam ad faciendum placitum eius.</i>]	Freedom is limited by concupiscence. God provides the law and the mental capacity to obey it.
Bicolon C – C	15: If you choose, you can keep the commandments,	and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice.	Emphasizes human agency, moral responsibility, and rejects fatalism.
Bicolon A2 – B2	16: He has placed before you fire and water;	stretch out your hand for whichever you choose.	Indicates that there is a wide range of possible future outcomes. Cf. Sir 3:30a.
Bicolon A2 – B2	17: Before each person are life and death,	and whichever one chooses will be given.	‘Life and death’ refers to retribution: prosperity and restoration for obedience and adversity and death for sin [8].
Hymn	18: For great is the wisdom of the Lord;	he is mighty in power and sees everything;	Refutation: God is not disinterested and distant.
Hymn	19: his eyes are on those who fear him,	and he knows every human action.	God is omniscient and omnipotent.
Inclusio (closing)	20: He has not commanded anyone to be wicked,	and he has not given anyone permission to sin.	God giving us freedom does not mean that He allows us to sin without consequence.

Argument in Summary: Sin exists. Sin is not necessary. God hates sin. God does not do what He hates.

➡ God does not cause sin. ➡ Humans cause sin.

The definition of sin requires the ability to follow the commandments, i.e. it requires the capacity for moral responsibility, which in turn presupposes genuine free will, given to us during the creation event.

God is omnipotent and omniscient and will respond to sin with retribution, even during the lifetime of the sinner.

Reflection

This section of the Book of Sirach is one of the most direct affirmations of free will and moral responsibility in the Bible. Ben Sira provides a picture of human beings capable of achieving a high level of autonomy if they succeed in controlling their lower appetites. It serves as an important counterbalance to other biblical passages that can be seen as stating a different view.

The free will doctrine of the Book of Sirach is also of great value in the contemporary discussion about anthropology in the context of naturalism. The apparent success of science and technology has favored worldviews that focus solely on the physical aspects of reality and provide a reductionist, purely mechanistic explanation of the human being, specifically the human mind. Free will is either interpreted as an illusion or redefined to mean a lesser form of freedom. The human being is reduced to a complicated biochemical machine, without any ontological difference from other complex structures, like a supercomputer, the internet, or even animals. Hence, moral responsibility in the traditional sense is becoming increasingly difficult to defend. This paradigm shift will hold severe consequences for human rights, our justice systems, and societal norms, especially upon the emergence of advanced AI and robotics.

Ben Sira reminds us that human beings do have moral responsibility and freedom to choose and that this freedom is anchored in our spiritual dimension, the *Imago Dei*. **We are more than machines. We should not treat each other and ourselves as if we were purely physical objects.**

References

- [1] Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, 17, (1965).
- [2] Manuscript A folio VI, and manuscript B folio II, at bensira.org.
- [3] For a comprehensive discussion about the Hellenistic philosophical influences on the Second Temple period see D. Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, The Anchor Bible, Doubleday, New York, 1979, pp. 46 – 58.
- [4] F. Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 13, 171-173.
- [5] Jas 1:13. No one, when tempted should say, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one.
- [6] Alt. translation: ‘Abominable wickedness the Lord hates and he does not let it happen to those who fear him.’
- [7] Gen 1:27. ‘So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.’
- [8] Deut 30:19: ‘I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.’