

THE USE OF  
THE OLD TESTAMENT  
IN THE NEW AND  
OTHER ESSAYS

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## “OF CABBAGES AND KINGS”—OR QUEANS

Notes on Ben Sira 36:18–21

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In Ben Sira 36:18–37:15<sup>1</sup> we find four roughly analogous sections on the subject of foods (36:18–20), women (36:21–26), friends (37:1–6), and advisers (37:7–15). These sections are now of very different lengths and degrees of development, perhaps because of the accretion of other proverbial material on these themes, which elsewhere too have excited the sages of Israel to eloquence; but it can be seen that each started with a thematic statement of either pattern A, for example,

Every meat doth the belly eat  
yet is one meat more pleasant than another (36:18)

or pattern B, for example,

Every friend sayeth: I am a friend;  
But there is a friend who is (only) friend  
in name (37:1, cf. 37:7),

i.e. schematically:

There are all sorts of X  
but one X is better than others utterly bad.

The introductory verse to the section on women, 36:21, is formally and verbally close to pattern A:

A woman will receive any man,  
yet is one woman more pleasant than another.

The Greek presents this verse in its correct position, at the start of the section on women, and in a form roughly equivalent to the above translation:

1. There are many systems of numbering verses in Ben Sira; to avoid giving a chaotic series of alternative numbers for each verse we cite only according to the enumeration of G. H. Box and W. O. E. Oesterley *apud* R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1913), vol. 1. Unless otherwise stated, the translations given also come from the same work.

*πάντα ἄρρενα ἐπιδέξεται γυνή,  
Ἐστιν δὲ θυγάτηρ θυγατρὸς κρεισσῶν.*

The Syriac has omitted the whole verse, for reasons that will become understandable later. The mediaeval Hebrew MS B, which recent studies have proved to be a faithful descendant of a Hebrew text of the first century B.C.,<sup>2</sup> gives this verse in a different place (in the middle of the section on foods, after 36:18) but in a form which essentially coincides with that of the LXX:

כל זכר תקבל אשה  
אך יש אשה מאהת תנעם

Despite the formal accord between this verse and other verses of the A pattern, such as 36:18,

כל זכר תקבל אשה [=כל אוכל אוכל בראש]  
אך יש אשה מאהת תנעם [=אך יש אוכל מאוכל נעים]

36:21 does not give us the sense that we require. Here we have a first hemistich that tells us that there are all sorts of *men* that a *woman* can marry (or whatever the odd term would mean); and yet the second hemistich (which also agrees formally with the pattern of the surrounding verses) shows us that such a first hemistich, though making an intellectually conceivable statement, is incoherent with its context. To contrast properly with the second hemistich we need rather, as the French commentator Lévi saw<sup>3</sup>—

2. The objections raised against the substantial authenticity of these Cairo Geniza MSS of Ben Sira were already laid to rest by A. A. Di Lella in his *Hebrew Text of Sirach: a Text-Critical and Historical Study*, Studies in Classical Literature, 1 (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1966); see also my review in *CBQ*, 30 (1968), 88–91. The Ben Sira MS subsequently discovered by Yigael Yadin at Masada and edited by him in *The Ben Sira Scroll from Masada* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1965) and in *Eretz-Israel*, 8 (1967), 1–45, shows that the whole dispute was one of the aberrations of scholarship.

3. I. Lévi, *L'Ecclésiastique, ou la Sagesse de Jésus, Fils de Sirah*, Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études: Sciences Religieuses, vol. 10, nos. 1–11 (Paris: Leroux, 1898–1901) 2: 172–73. The difficulty was also sensed by earlier commentators. Typical of their suggestions is that of J. Knabenbauer's commentary on Ecclesiasticus in *Cursus Scripturæ Sacrae* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1902). He glosses “omnem masculum excipiet mulier” by “debet nubere quicunque demum ei assignatur, cf. L(esêtre) Fr(itzsche) R(yssel)”; and explains “ipsa itaque mulier non potest discernere; at aliter res se habet ex parte viri; ille potest et debet discernere quam in matrimonium ducturus est.” Although such a thought would restore coherence to the distich, the words crucial for making the contrast are unfortunately not in the text but only in Knabenbauer's exegesis.

they see these things clearly in France—a statement on the many types of *women* that a *man* can choose to marry.

Either one of two very simple corrections to the Hebrew can, however, restore this needed sense.

כל זכר דובק לאשה  
[כל זכר יקוף לאשה]  
אך יש מאשה תנעם

Every male cleaveth unto a woman<sup>4</sup>  
yet is one woman more pleasant than another.

By altering the word division (transferring the final **ל** from the end of the verb to the start of the word **אשה**) and by correcting what remains of the verb, either into **דובק**<sup>5</sup> or into **יקוף**,<sup>6</sup> we get the statement about the many types of women which we need, and which contrasts properly with the second hemistich; and we gain in the process a statement which conforms to the facts of life—a criterion not to be neglected in editing the shrewd sages of the ancient East. We all get married, but not everyone gets a Helen of Troy.

That the above emendation does not strain the material and palaeographical possibilities of textual corruption in the second century B.C. will be readily granted. The wrong word division, and the consequent changes of the verb, will have occurred very early in the textual tradition, because the error—surely a *conjunctive* error—affected at a very early date the common archetype of LXX and of the Geniza MS.<sup>7</sup> It will have taken place under the influence of the form of verses like 36:18, where **כל אוכל** is the object of the

4. Cf. Gen. 2:24 with instead of **וְנִשֵּׁה** and **וְנִשְׁתַּחֲנוּ** instead of **וְשָׁבֹרֶת** (cf. perhaps LXX MSS a d p d<sub>2</sub>): does the modified form of the verse no longer imply a reference to marriage? The reader can supply for himself modern proverbial parallels.

5. If both the form and the preposition be allowable, the **וְ** will have been misread as **וְ**, and the remaining consonants will have suffered metathesis after the erroneous word division.

6. In this case the **וְ** will have been misread as **וְ** and the **בְּ** will have become **בָּ**. A *piel* would be unexpected but **יָקַר** could be a further Aramaism, in orthography also, for a *qal*. **יָקַר** is the standard Syriac equivalent of **בָּרַךְ**, cf. Gen. 2:24. The sense of the verb in Jewish Aramaic is analogous, though it is not, to my knowledge, used about matrimony. Hopefully we show good taste in refusing to speculate about a possible reading with  $\sqrt{בָּרַךְ}$ .

7. For another conjunctive error that has affected the tradition of Ben Sira at a similarly high date, see my "Notes and Queries on 'The Ben Sira Scroll from Masada,'" in the festschrift for W. F. Albright, *Eretz-Israel*, 9 (1969), 116–17.

verb and not, as here, its subject—corruptions naturally have their own mechanical reasons which should not be construed as arguments for the good quality of the resultant text—but against nonsense, however well attested, the Bentleian canon of *ratio et res ipsa* must prevail.

In both the Hebrew and the Syriac versions, 36:18 is followed immediately by 36:19. In the Hebrew MS B, however, 36:21 is placed between 36:18 and the remaining verses on foods (36:19–20). It is clearly misplaced here. Moreover, in the place where it should come, after 36:20, we find a peculiar verse which occurs in none of the other versions.

This verse is transcribed by the editors in various ways. All agree in reading

כל ?? תأكل חיה  
אך יש מכיה מכיה תנעם

The second word is transcribed by Peters,<sup>8</sup> by Lévi,<sup>9</sup> and by Smend,<sup>10</sup> and by Segal.<sup>11</sup> Peters translates with "Jeden Erschlagenen frisst das Getier, aber die eine Zuchtigung ist angenehmer als die andere," a translation that lacks something in coherence (!) and could perhaps be improved by giving the sense of "corpse / thing slain." Segal's text is similar in meaning: "a wild beast eats all animals that it has killed (= טרף), but not all the meats are of equal quality." Smend saves himself from the duty of translating his text by maintaining that the verse is a senseless variant conflated from 36:18 and 36:21. Lévi suggests no translation of his **ונבר**, asking whether it might be a mistake for **נברה** (from the verb **ברה**, "nourish oneself"), and observing furthermore that the sense of **מכיה** is far from certain.

Two words then are causing our difficulties, **מכיה** and **וְנִכְסָה**. The readings **וְנִכְסָה** and **מכיה** must be rejected on palaeographical grounds. Of the materially possible readings **ונכד**, **ונכד זכר**, **ונבר**, and **ונבר זכר**, the first three are lexicographically or materially of dubious digestibility, even for wild animals. **ונבר**, however, and this is perhaps the easiest

8. N. Peters, *Der juengst wieder aufgefundene hebraische Text des Buches Ecclesiasticus* (Freiburg i. Br: Herder, 1902).

9. Lévi, 2: 174.

10. Rudolph Smend, *Die Weisheit des Jesus Sirach hebraisch und deutsch* (Berlin: Reimer, 1906), p. 31.

11. M. S. Segal, <sup>2</sup>ספר בן סירא השלם (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1958).

reading of all from a material point of view, gives us a perfectly acceptable meaning. The verb נָבַר means in rabbinic Hebrew "to dig up with the snout." It has the same meaning in Jewish Aramaic, and Syriac; in Syriac we find also *nbwr*, "a snout," and *nbr*, "the claws of a cock."<sup>12</sup> נָבַר (*néber* or *nibbār*) will then naturally mean "a thing dug up by the snout."

"An animal will eat all that can be rooted up by its snout" is a perfectly plausible sense for the first hemistich; but what of the second? Like our predecessors, we find מְכֻה unpromising. However, our restoration of "digging up with the snout" in the first hemistich points us to a very specific domain, that of the finding of truffles; and the Hebrew word for "truffles" is, not מְכֻה, but כְּמָה!<sup>13</sup> By metathesis of the consonants, the rare word כְּמָה has been corrupted into the common מְכֻה—this is the easiest of corruptions to admit—and the resultant sense harmonizes perfectly with the best material reading of the first hemistich, and with the form of the surrounding aphorisms. The verse (?36:18c-d) should then be translated:

An animal will eat all that can be rooted up by  
his snout,  
but some truffles taste better than others,<sup>14</sup>

12. For Hebrew see *b Baba Kamma* 17b, and see E. Ben Yehuda, *Thesaurus totius Hebraitatis* (Berlin and Jerusalem: Langenscheidt, 1908-59), p. 3493 *sub verbo*. For Jewish Aramaic see Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim . . .* (N. Y.: Pardes, 1950), p. 870 *sub verbo*. For Syriac see R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879-1901), 2: 2273 and T. Audo, *Dictionnaire de la langue Chaldéenne* (Mosul: PP. Dominicains, 1897), 2: 81, each *sub verbo*. I find also in J.-B. Belot, *Vocabulaire Arabe-Français* (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1898), p. 798, a meaning "Fouiller, chercher" given for the Arabic *nabara*.

13. The word is common Semitic; cf. Wolfram von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1965-69), 1: 432, on *kam-patu*; E. W. Lane, *An Arabic English Lexicon* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1863-1893), p. 2629, on *km<sup>2</sup>* (the precise form is disputed); Payne Smith, 1: 1723, on *kym<sup>2</sup>*; Audo, 1: 468, on *kmt<sup>2</sup>*; Ben Yehuda, p. 2416, on *mc̄ah*. The Hebrew lexicographers hesitate on the proper form and gender of the singular; the plural is indifferently כְּמָהִים and כְּמָהֹת. If we merely make the minimum correction to Ben Sira we will have here a feminine noun (cf. the verb) and there is nothing impossible in this; however it could be that the gender of the verb was subsequently changed to the feminine in consequence of the corruption to מְכֻה.

14. On truffles we have little to add of substance to the treatise given by I. Loew, *Die Flora der Juden* (Vienna and Leipzig: R. Loewit, 1926), 1: 26-44, where one finds multifarious details; the truth of our second hemistich is amply demonstrated there. For the medicinal uses of truffles see Ibn el Beithar, *Traité des Simples, Notices et extraits des MSS de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, Vols. 23, 25, 26 (Paris: Imprimerie

and the words כְּמָה and נָבַר should be restored to our dictionaries of early Hebrew.

Does this proverb form an original part of Ben Sira's book? Nothing in the contents or the attestation of the verse is irreconcilable with its genuineness,<sup>15</sup> even though it is not clear whether it stood originally after 36:18 or after 36:20. A discoverer has a natural tendency to favor his own discoveries; but we hope that other scholars will share our taste for Ben Sira's truffles.

Nationale, 1877-1883), 3: 192-94, to which R. P. B. Couroyer O.P. kindly drew my attention. They grow in the southern desert of Palestine as well as the Syrian Desert: Prof. M. Zohary of the Botanical Department of the Hebrew University informs me that he does not know of any specimens found in the more settled wooded parts of Palestine. The truffle of the Syrian Desert, the best reputed species, can be found by men, because it causes a slight elevation in the level of the soil; see R. Montagne, *La civilisation du désert* (Paris: Hachette, 1947), p. 24 (a reference for which I thank R. P. R. de Vaux O.P.). I can find no ancient reference from the Near East to the use of pigs or dogs for finding and digging up truffles; however, Prof. Zohary tells me that he has seen the Beduin in Syria use dogs (though not pigs) to locate them. Even this verse does not necessarily imply that animals were employed to dig up truffles for their masters, but only that they have a tendency to dig them up on their own account; it is indeed for this reason that pigs have, as indirectly attested by Prov. 11:22, rings in their noses.

15. Its formal closeness to 36:18, 21, could be used to argue either for its authenticity (it will even have belonged, with them, to Ben Sira's source) or alternatively for its being an early marginal gloss (being added because of its formal similarity, it will have been inserted in various copies after different verses). The aberrant positions of this verse and of verse 21 are not satisfactorily explained by saying that only one of them is a gloss, for we would still have to explain the odd position of 36:21 in MS B. One could equally well explain the evidence of the Hebrew MSS by postulating that the two formally similar verses simply swapped places; or alternatively one could assume that, in one of the MSS that preceded MS B, the verse on truffles once came directly before 21 and subsequently (by homoeoarchton and homoeoteleuton) has swallowed that verse up in MS B; in another of its sources the two verses will have stood together after 36:18, and after a similar haplography (this time of the former of the two verses) 36:21 now stands alone in its surprising position in MS B. If the verse is a genuine part of Ben Sira we must grant that the haplography of the whole verse in the Greek and the Syriac is a *non-conjunctive* error, committed independently by the translators of those versions. This is not so implausible as it might seem; the Syriac has in fact omitted not only this verse but the probably adjacent 36:21 as well; this version is characterized by the frequent omission of whole verses and especially of verses whose sense was obscure or corrupt; and the corrupt מְכֻה would probably have stood in the text that the Syriac translator used.