



Cultural Adaptation in Ancient Translations of Ben Sira

Kulturowa adaptacja w starożytnych przekładach Syna Syracha

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Abstract

In this paper, the author provides an overview of two verses of Ben Sira which are problematic for textual criticism. The discussion around the difference between the Greek and the Hebrew versions of 16:7 is well known. Verse 9:9 is less discussed due to an emendation in popular reconstructions based on the extant Hebrew fragments. However, analysis of these two examples shows that the difference in Hebrew and Greek sources can be explained neither by *lapsus calami*, nor by translation techniques; rather, it should be explained by a deliberate editing adapting the texts to the cultural and religious needs of the target groups.

Streszczenie

W tym artykule autor przedstawia przegląd dwóch wersetów Księgi Syracha, które są problematyczne dla krytyki tekstu. Dyskusja na temat różnicy między grecką a hebrajską wersją 16,7 jest dobrze znana. Werset 9,9 jest

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² I cite the text and sigla of the Greek Text according to the edition of J. Ziegler (Ziegler 1980) and follow the numeration of chapters and verses of the same edition.

popular Slavonic recension of Sirach deviates from the archetype because it was revised on the basis of a shorter Greek source. The revised text was copied into the Gennady Bible and became widespread in the era of printing. The revised version of the text then became popular and widespread, it was read, quoted and revised, while the recension of the Tarnovo Bible, closer to the archetype, was less known, there being only three extant copies of this version. This situation poses some difficulties for editorial textual criticism: which revision should be published as the body text – a reconstruction, the best manuscript, or a *textus receptus*?

I encountered the same difficulty whilst working on a commented translation of Sirach into Russian (Sizikov, Vartanov, and Mešerskaâ 2024). Most translations known to us represent a compromise text based on the extant Hebrew fragments and the reconstructions of the Greek translation.³ Usually the Greek text is corrected on the basis of the extant Hebrew passages, but there are cases where the evidence of the Hebrew text is ignored or a conjecture based on Greek material is proposed. Such an approach does not take into account the fact that many biblical books, including the book of Sirach, existed in different editions, their texts were changed in parallel and independently, and thus reconstruction of the common archetype is hardly possible. That is why we decided to translate the critical text prepared by J. Ziegler and each fragment of the Hebrew text including the marginalia separately. This article aims to analyze two fragments from Sirach to demonstrate the difference between the sources which cannot be explained by translation technique or by unconscious changes through the manuscript transmission of the text.

³ An independent translation of Hebrew, Latin, Greek and Syriac sources supplied with the original texts were published recently by German colleagues (Fabry et al. 2024).

Princes or Gigantes? Sirach 16:7

The first example is fairly well-known, Sir 16:7. Pericope 16:5–10 (how God punishes sinners) is preserved in manuscript A and partially in manuscript B⁴, and verse 7, which interests us, is extant in both manuscripts.⁵

MS A: אשר לא נשא לנסיכי קדם המורים עולם בנבורתם

MS B: אשר לא נשא לנסיכי קדם [] המורדים בנבורתם

“The one who did not forgive **the princes** of old, those who substituted their might in place of the Eternal One” (translation by M. Abegg and B. Parker)⁶.

The Greek text is different: οὐκ ἐξιλάσατο περὶ τῶν ἀρχαίων γιγάντων, οἱ ἀπέστησαν τῇ ἰσχύι αὐτῶν. “He did not propitiate for the ancient giants, those who revolted in their strength”⁷.

J. Ziegler gives no variant reading for γιγάντων besides the addition of the pronoun πᾶς in codex 248: ἀρχαίων πάντων γιγάντων. The Greek plural noun γίγαντες in translations of other books of the Old Testament is used as an equivalent either for גִּבּוֹרִים “*champions*” (cf. Ezek 32:27), or for נְפִילִים “*giants*” (cf. Gen 6:4), whereas נָסִיךְ is usually rendered as ἄρχων “*ruler*” (Jos 13:21; Ps 83:12; Ezek 32:30)⁸. The Greek text of this verse does not present a problem for interpretation. It has the same key

⁴ We use the commonly accepted siglae of the Latin alphabet introduced by R. Smend (Smend 1906) to designate the extant Hebrew manuscripts of Sirach.

⁵ We use the transcription of M. Abegg from the on-line resource The Book of Ben Sira, access date September 25, 2024.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ New English Translation of the Septuagint (NETS).

⁸ Another occurrence of this noun is in Mich 5:4, where δῆγμα “*sting*” is used as an equivalent.

word used in Gen 6:4⁹, and the context itself overlaps with the book of Enoch¹⁰, and we see a similar text in Wisdom 14:6.

The Hebrew text uses the noun נֹסִיךְ, which in other books, doubtless known to Ben Sira, is used in the sense of “*prince*” or “*ruler*”, and the context does not permit Nebuchadnezzar to be pictured here as in Is 14:4–27 or Dan 4:7–30, as A. Di Lella and P. Skehan suggest. The Babylonian king did not rebel against anyone, he was a persecutor of God’s people. According to A. Di Lella and P. Skehan, Ben Sira used נֹסִיךְ “*prince*” instead of גִּבּוֹרִים “*giants*” to consciously avoid “the mythological overtones to the Genesis narrative so familiar from the Enoch literature and (later) Jubilees” (Di Lella and Skehan 1987, 270). However, the kings of the “historical” period violate the chronology of the pericope, for the next verse deals with the punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah. Even if one accepts the thesis that Ben Sira polemizes the Book of Enoch and opposes the wisdom of revelation, this position in no way rejects mythology as a form of presenting one’s own history. M. Gilbert assumed that “the princes” refer to the Canaanite kings mentioned in 14:8, but he did not explain the use of the term נֹסִיךְ (Gilbert 2005, 92). M. Goff offers a more detailed analysis of the lexicon, based on Ezek 32. He also believes that we are talking about the early history of Canaan, not the pre-Flood era, and that the uncommon use of the lexeme can be explained by the fact that the tradition of describing antediluvian giants and princes of antiquity could overlap (Goff 2010, 655). To summarize, one has to read Hebrew 16:7 either as an antediluvian story of giants, overlooking the inappropriate vocabulary, or as an early history of Canaan in which the kings defeated by Abraham, like the antediluvian giants, used their strength to oppose the Lord.

⁹ B. Wright suggests that it is clear reference to the Genesis narrative (Wright 1989, 165), W. Th. van Peursen also interprets the passage the same way (van Peursen 2004, 319).

¹⁰ For detailed comparison with the 1 Enoch see (Argall 1995, 228–30).

Based on the extant manuscripts, we cannot explain why the Greek translation gives a “pre-Flood” interpretation of the passage. It is possible that the translator did not realize that it was about Canaanite kings,¹¹ or perhaps he was dealing with a different version of the Hebrew text. It can be assumed that the Greek translation reflects the archetype, while the Hebrew sources contain a later correction, which perhaps better corresponds to M. Goff’s hypothesis about the mixing of narrative models.

Who to drink with? Sirach 9:9¹²

After the conquests of Alexander the Great and the Wars of the Diadochi, Israel came into contact with Hellenistic culture, which influenced not only the economy, social structure, but also the religious situation, resulting in conflicts and contradictions. Reflection on this influence and its results can be found in later biblical books, both historical (Maccabees) and wisdom literature (Ecclesiastes, Sirach). Unlike Ecclesiastes, the Book of Sirach is much easier to date based on both the text of the book itself and the prologue of the “translator”.¹³ Therefore, the historical information contained in the Book of Sirach about life in Judea in the period preceding the dramatic events of the Maccabean Wars is of great value. However, when using the book as a historical source, it is necessary to take into account the history of the text itself, which,

¹¹ For the detailed analysis of the translation technique see (Wagner 1999; Wright 1989).

¹² We reproduce our analysis of the verse published in Russian (Sizikov 2023) with some additions.

¹³ Chapter 50 gives a detailed description of the high priest Simon II (219–196 B.C.). On the basis of this description, we can assume with a high degree of certainty that the book was compiled by a contemporary of Simon II after his death, when Judea was under Seleucid control, perhaps under the reign of Antiochus III, when the economy of the region was flourishing. The troubles and misfortunes that befell the Jews during the reign of Antiochus IV, who came to power in 175 B.C., are not mentioned anywhere in the book of Sirach, so the book of Sirach was compiled between 196 and 175 B.C.

unfortunately, is often neglected, using controversial reconstructions of texts or translations made from them.

Verse 9:9 is found in Pericope 9:1–16 which consists of two parts. The first part (1–9) deals with proper behavior between a man and a woman, and the second part (10–16) deals with male friendship. Verse 9:9 is at the boundary of these two sections. The verse in Hebrew is preserved in manuscript A (f. III v.):

עם בעלה אל תשתם:
וא[ל]תסב עמו שכור: כן תטה [ע]ליה לב וברמים תטה אל שחת:

*Thou shalt not sit with her husband at a meal.
nor drink with him drunkenly,
lest thou incline thine heart to her,
and because of blood guilt thou wilt not be inclined to destruction.*

The Greek text according to J. Ziegler's edition is the following:

Μετὰ ὑπάνδρου γυναικὸς μὴ κάθου τὸ σύνολον
καὶ μὴ συμβολοκοπήσης μετ' αὐτῆς ἐν οἴνῳ,
μήποτε ἐκκλίνηῃ ἡ ψυχὴ σου ἐπ' αὐτήν
καὶ τῷ ἅιματί σου ὀλίσθης εἰς ἀπώλειαν.

*Do not sit with a married woman at all.
nor stay with her at a feast of wine,
lest your soul be inclined to her,
then you will slip in blood into destruction.*

In the Lucian edition and several manuscripts (L-694-672) the verse is preceded by another warning, “and do not recline on your elbow with her” (καὶ μὴ κατακλίθης ἐπ' ἀγκῶνα μετ' αὐτῆς); and in quotations from Clement of Alexandria, the warning is repeated (καὶ μὴ συμμετακλίθης ἐπ' ἀγκῶνα μετ' αὐτῆς). We see the same repetition of this warning in the Latin translation as well, “Do not lie down on your elbow with another man's wife, do not even sit with her, and do not recline on your elbow with her either” (*cum aliena muliere non accumbas super cubitum cum aliena muliere ne sedeas omnino nec accumbas cum ea super cubitum et non alterceris cum ea in vino ne forte declinet cor tuum in*

illa et sanguine tuo labaris in perditionem). For the reading κάθου τὸ σύνολον G. Kuhm (Kuhm 1929, 293) suggested a conjecture “do not put the elbow” (μὴ κατάθες ὠλένην), based on an alternative interpretation of MS A (f. III, v. 7) אֵל תָּשׂ אֶצְמִי.

All Greek sources preserve the feminine pronoun in the second line “with her” (μετ’ αὐτῆς). If בעלה can still be read as bə’ulā (pass. part. fem. with the acceptable omission of the mater lectionis ו) “a married woman”, though it is better to read ba’lāh (noun. masc. + pronom. suff. fem. 3 p. sing.) “her husband”, then the following preposition עִם “with” in the manuscript stands with the masc. pronoun עִמּוֹ “with him”, which comes into conflict with the feminine gender if one reads בעלה as bə’ulā. Unfortunately, in most translations and commentaries we find this reading is harmonized with the Greek source — it is forbidden to sit and drink wine with a woman. A. Di Lella and P. Skehan not only suggest reading עִמָּה “with her” despite the fact that the manuscript clearly reads עִמּוֹ “with him”, but even leave the difference between the sources without any commentary (Di Lella and Skehan 1987, 218). T. Muraoka also interprets בעלה after the Greek translation as bə’ulā and does not make any attempt to consider different possibilities of vocalizing the Hebrew word and suggests that the Greek μετ’ αὐτῆς is the only natural reading, even though the Hebrew source reads differently (Muraoka 2023, 168). Since this verse in Hebrew is preserved in only one manuscript, which is much younger than the majuscule Greek codices — it is not possible to establish a connection between the sources. In such cases, one must resort to the method of eclectic textual criticism and interpret each reading separately.

Let us consider other differences with the Hebrew text. We see that the Greek text suggests “soul” ψυχὴ as an equivalent for “heart” לֵב, while the quotations from Clement of Alexandria read “heart” καρδιά, as in the Latin translation *cor*. This discrepancy does not greatly change the meaning of the verse, since both lexemes point to the inner personality.

Ψυχή occurs as an equivalent of בָּל several times in Sirach (cf. 4:17; 5:2; 6:32) along with καρδία (cf. 3:26; 13:25, 26; 16:23), with no consistent pattern in the choice of equivalents. In view of the evidence of the Latin translation from the Greek, we may assume that this variation is due more to the result of the redaction of the Greek source than to the technique of translation.

J. Ziegler suggests the reading τῷ ἄιματί σου ὀλίσθης on the basis of a quotation from Clement of Alexandria, the evidence of the Latin translation *sanguis*, and the Hebrew דָּמָא, which is to be understood as blood vengeance, cf. Lev 20:9, 11, 12, 16, 27; Eze 18:13. All Greek manuscripts have “with your spirit you shall slip” τῷ πνεύματί σου ὀλίσθης, codex 575 gives the “easier” reading “you shall bring your spirit” κατὰξεις τὸ πνεῦμα σου, but we still read the “spirit” πνεῦμα. Apparently, the meaning of this lexeme is to be understood as “the inner person” and it acts as a synonymous parallelism to “soul” ψυχή in the third line. The lexeme πνεῦμα occurs eight times in Sirach (9:9; 31:14; 38:23; 39:6; 39:28; 43:17; 48:12; 48:24), for three of these occurrences a parallel is preserved in the Hebrew text. In verse 38:23, the noun πνεῦμα is used as an equivalent for the Heb. “soul” נַפְשׁ: “in the exodus of his [the deceased’s] soul” ἐν ἐξόδῳ πνεύματος αὐτοῦ cf. Heb. “with the exodus of his soul” עַם צֶאֱת נַפְשׁוֹ. In this case, the same meaning of “the inner being of man” is realized.

In the following verses, the word is used in the same meaning: in 48:24, πνεῦμα stands as an equivalent for the Heb. רוּחַ “by a great spirit saw [Isaiah]” πνεύματι μεγάλῳ εἶδεν, cf. Heb. בְּרוּחַ גְּבוּרָה חַזָּה; in 34:13, “the spirit of those that fear the Lord shall live” πνεῦμα φοβουμένων κύριον ζήσεται; in 39:6, “shall be filled with the spirit of reason” πνεύματι συνέσεως ἐμπλησθήσεται; in 48:12, “and Elisha was filled with his [Elijah’s] spirit” (καὶ Ἐλισαίε ἐνεπλήσθη πνεύματος αὐτοῦ). In 43:17, another component of the meaning of the noun πνεῦμα is realized: “wind”, “a sudden gust of wind”, συστροφή πνεύματος renders

the Hebrew “storm and hurricane” סופה וסערה (manuscripts B and M). Perhaps the same semantics is represented in 39:28, “there are winds that are made for vengeance” $\epsilon\lambda\zeta\ \epsilon\kappa\delta\acute{\iota}\kappa\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma\ \epsilon\kappa\tau\iota\sigma\tau\alpha\iota$.¹⁴

If we summarize all this, we get three variants of this verse:

Greek sources without any conjecture, according to, for example, the Vatican Codex, offer the following text:

*Do not sit with a married woman at all,
and do not stay with her at a wine feast,
lest your soul be inclined to her,
lest your spirit slip into destruction.*

A young man is warned against meeting married women at the feasts, because it may lead to a mortal sin and unpleasant consequences. The perilousness of these consequences could probably have been understood differently by Christians, yet we are dealing with Christian copies; the use of the lexeme for “spirit” $\piνε\upsilon\mu\alpha$ may have encouraged an eschatological understanding of the prospect of breaking the 7th commandment (Ex 20:14).

The Latin translation and quotation from Clement of Alexandria suggest a similar picture:

*With another man's wife do not recline on your cubit,
Do not sit with another man's wife,
Do not recline on your cubit with another man's wife,
and do not talk with her over wine,
lest you heart be turned to her,
and you shall slip by your own blood into destruction.*

Despite the similarity to the Greek text, the Latin text contains two significant differences from the Greek one. The first is that the prohibition against drinking with another man's wife is more elaborate: a detailed description of a man's semi-reclining position at a feast is

¹⁴ One could interpret “there are spirits that are made for vengeance,” but this would contradict both the context of the verse and the general figurative style of the book of Sirach, in which we find no other imagery of the Otherworld.

mentioned (we see this same clarification in the quotation from Clement of Alexandria and in several manuscripts of the Lucian edition). We believe this is a glossa that arose as a clarification of a difficult passage, since the Greek source says μὴ κάθου “do not sit”. The Greek feast was different from the Roman one, respectable women did not attend either *symposium* or *deipnon*, and on special occasions, for example at a wedding, these women rather sat than reclined. This may be the reason why the Greek translation uses the verb κάθημαι “to sit” as the equivalent for the Hebrew אכל “to eat”. At Roman feasts, however, married women could recline at dinner with their husbands (Dunbabin 2003, 11–36). Apparently, the author of the Latin glossa assumed that it was a triclinium, only in this case was it possible to be so close to another man’s wife. The second difference is that contact with a married woman could end in death, perhaps blood vengeance, no eschatological punishment is implied in the Latin text. In this case, the Latin text is much closer to the Hebrew text.

The oldest (8th cent. B.C.) description of a feast in the Bible is in Amos 6:4–6, which is similar to the usual descriptions and depictions of Mediterranean feasts at which people eat and drink semi-reclining, leaning on their elbow (McLaughlin 2001). However, in this case it is about Samaria long before the conquests of Alexander the Great. There is not much written evidence about how a feast in Judea was held before the beginning of the Maccabean wars, which makes Sirach one of the most important sources containing the detailed recommendations for behavior at a feast 34:12–19 and advice on its organization 35:1–12. It should be assumed that feasting in Judea had its own specifics, especially in the period under consideration, when part of Israelite society was trying to follow the Greek way of life, and the other part was trying to defend Jewish traditions (Shimoff 1996). Greco-Roman feasts had a religious component that was hardly acceptable in Judea (Węcowski 2014, 139–59), therefore the organization of the feast had Middle Eastern-specifics (Schwartz 2009, 193–216) (cf. prohibition of speech at

a feast 35:7). Ben Sira recommends refraining from overeating at a feast, but we do not find any restrictions of a sexual nature associated with the feast, except for the verse 9:9, and there is a great deal of advice in the Book on how to avoid relationships outside of marriage (19:2; 23:22-26; 26:10; 26:22-23; 41:20). It can be assumed that the sexual component of feasts in Judea was significantly less than in Greece and Rome, and this made the presence of married women at such events appropriate.

The Hebrew text as we find in the manuscript is the clearest. Unfortunately, it does not specify whether the woman was sitting or lying down, but we do know that the woman eats and drinks wine.¹⁵ The Hebrew text forbids a young man seeing a married man so as not to become infatuated with his wife. This prohibition makes sense when it is read in conjunction with the previous verse 8: “Turn away your eyes from a beautiful woman, and do not look at a beauty that is not yours. Many have died because of a woman, and so she burns those who are in love with her with fire”.

העלים עין מאשת חן ואל תביט אל יפי לא לך: בעד אשה
השחתו רבים וכן אהביה באש תלהט

In Greek, the verse is mostly the same:

Turn an eye from a shapely woman, and do not ogle beauty belonging to another; by a woman's beauty many have gone astray, and from it, fondness flares up like a fire. (Sir. 9:8 NETS)

ἀπόστροφον ὀφθαλμὸν ἀπὸ γυναικὸς εὐμόρφου
καὶ μὴ καταμάνθανε κάλλος ἀλλότριον·
ἐν κάλλει γυναικὸς πολλοὶ ἐπλανήθησαν,
καὶ ἐκ τούτου φιλία ὥς πῦρ ἀνακαίεται.

The pericope enumerates all the dangers to a man concerning the opposite sex: verses 1–2 is a warning in communicating with his own

¹⁵ It should be noted that eating and drinking may not have been different parts of the feast, it may be a two-part parallelism common to such literature.

wife; verse 3 — with hetaera (Gr. γυνή ἐταριζομένη; Heb. אשה זרה “unlawful woman”), verse 4 — with a singer, verse 5 — with a maiden; verses 6–7 — with a harlot (Gr. πορνή; Hebrew זונה “harlot”). All encounters threaten property losses,¹⁶ and infatuation with married women could lead to death (8–9). According to the Hebrew text, a married woman is present at a feast with her husband, but no freedom to contacts with other members of the opposite sex is assumed.

In our opinion, the Hebrew version presents a more difficult reading, which, however, is not dark and has an internal connection with other parts of the pericope. According to one of the main principles of textual criticism *lectio difficilior potior*, we can assume that the Hebrew reading is more likely to be the original one. The principles of textual criticism are aimed at finding an answer to the fundamental question, “Which of the two readings could have become the other?” In our case, it is much easier to explain how the recommendation to stay away even from the husband of a beautiful woman to avoid unnecessary contacts, turned into a prohibition to recline at a feast with a married woman. Given the text corruption in verse 7, it can be argued that only the Hebrew source offers a text that is coherent in form and content.

If we have assumed that the Greek translation, its expanded version in Clement, and the Latin sources offer a modified version for easier reading, then we should not give up the assumption that the Hebrew text could have similarly undergone revisions that would have reflected the editors’ ideas, especially given that the book of Sirach “does not defile the hands”. Although few manuscript records of the Hebrew text have

¹⁶ Verse 7 in the Hebrew source is a continuation of verse 6: “Do not betray your soul to a harlot, lest you destroy your inheritance, ⁷being disgraced because of her pleasing appearance to the eye and then emptying the house. The Greek text is different: “Do not give your soul to whores, lest you lose your inheritance. ⁷Do not look around in city alleyways, and in its deserted places do not wander (NETS). The Greek text (as well as the Latin) is apparently corrupted and breaks the development of the instruction in the pericope.

survived, the book of Sirach was well known in rabbinic circles and is quoted in both the Palestinian Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud. J. Labendz's analysis of quotations from Sirach has shown that aphorisms of Ben Sira circulated in Palestine and in Babylonia in tannaitic and in amoraic times (Labendz 2006). In her paper, J. Labendz reproduces a fragment from the Talmud (B. Sanhedrin 100b) containing a quotation from the pericope. The quotation and its translation are reproduced according to the mentioned publication (Labendz 2006, 387).

אל תתאצל עם בעלה למסוך עמו יין ושכר
כי בתאר אשה יפה רבים השחתו ועצומים כל הרוגיה

Do not turn to her husband to drink wine or liquor.

For the form of a beautiful woman many have been destroyed and great [in number] are all those she killed.

As we can see, although the quotation is not entirely accurate¹⁷, it is still recommended to abstain from drinking alcohol with the husband, not with the married woman herself, thus the Talmud reproduces the same prohibition as the Hebrew text. This, in our opinion, is an argument in favor of considering the reading of the Hebrew text as primary one.

Although we cannot provide more evidence to support the reading presented in the Cairo Genizah manuscript, we can say with certainty that the sources reflect different paradigms of human behavior during the feast. According to the Greek and Latin translations, a married woman could partake in a feast, consume alcohol with other men and even recline with or opposite them (otherwise why would anyone forbid it?), while the Hebrew text recommends a man refrain from drinking wine with the husband of a beautiful woman, lest he become infatuated with her because he might be killed for doing so.

The above examples show that some historical realities and social institutions are presented differently in the Hebrew text of the Book of Sirach and in its translations. In our view, this is the result of a cultural

¹⁷ J. Labendz mentions that the same quotation can be found in B. Yevamot 63b.

adaptation, a re-reading in a different context, an attempt to adapt the text to one's own needs. The over-simplified presentation of these realities and institutions in modern translations of the Bible distorts not only our understanding of Jewish life in Judea and the Diaspora in the Hellenistic era but also Christian and Jewish understanding of the Book of Sirach.

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