

Ben Sira 6:26-28 and the Yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven

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2Q18, dated on paleographical grounds to the second half of the first cent. BCE, contains the partially preserved lines of Ben Sira 6:13-14, 20-22, and 26-31 (reproduced in Pancratius C. Beentjes, *The Book of Ben Sira in Hebrew* [VTSup 68; corrected ed.; Atlanta: SBL, 2006] 123). In this note, the Hebrew text of what we refer to as Ben Sira 6:26-28 will be the object of attention. All of six letters of these verses are preserved in 2Q18, more than enough to identify the fragment with certainty! Anyone who loves ancient Hebrew and working with manuscripts will enjoy seeing why this is so. Here are the three lines:

ה	[]	26
פה	[]	27
ענג	[]	28

The identification of these lines with Ben Sira 6:26-28 is certain because, on the working hypothesis that 2Q18 furnishes a poetic text line by line, the preserved line ends match up with Ben Sira 6:26-28 insofar as we know it from two manuscripts of Ben Sira recovered from the Cairo Geniza, MS A and MS C. The texts of all available Hebrew Ben Sira manuscripts are published in electronic format in Benjamin Wright's edition prepared for CATSS, available in Libronix format through Logos Bible Software ([here](#) or [here](#)).

In MS A, 6:26-28 appears, after 6:22 + 27:5-6! – that's another story – as follows:

הט שכמד ושאה	26
ואל תקץ בתחבולתיה :	
דרש וחקר בקש ומצא	27
והחזקתה ואל תרפה :	
כי לאחור תמצא מנוחתה	28
ונהפך לך לתענוג :	

In MS C, 6:28 appears, after 6:18-19 and before 6:35! – once again, that's another story – as follows:

28 כי לאחור תמצא מנוחתה ותהפך לך לתענוג .

Insofar as they overlap, the texts agree in every detail, except for ונהפך vs. ותהפך (which seems the better reading) in 6:28, and *scriptio defectiva* vs. *scriptio plena*. Note that all three exemplars, 2Q18, MS A, and MS C, signal line ends by formatting and/or special symbols. MS A presents the text half-line by half-line. Here is a translation of Hebrew Ben Sira 6:26-28:

Stoop your shoulder and bear her,
do not be in dread of her directives,
consult and ascertain, seek and find,
hold on to her and do not let go;
thereafter you will find her domain of rest,

and she for you will become a delight.

Wisdom is spoken of as a yoke one is to bear. Seek and you will find her, and thereafter you will find rest, and the burden of her ways will turn into a delight.

The demands of wisdom are the same as those of Torah; Ben Sira regards the latter as the example par excellence of the former (cf. 1:26; 15:1; 19:20, 24; 24:23, 35:1-2; 41:8; 42:2; 45:5; 49:4). And, as [Psalm 19:8-15](#) clarifies, those demands are sweeter than honeycomb.

As Ben Sira 6:30 (MS A) puts it:

עלי זהב עולה
ומוסרתיה פתיל תכלת :

Her yoke is a yoke of gold,
her bonds, a purple cord.

If you are a Jew, and the words of Pirkei Avot 3:5 (see below) are not ringing in your ears, you need to study more.

If you are a Christian, and the words of Jesus reported in Matthew 11:28 and 7:7 do not come immediately to mind, you need to take Matthew 13:52 to heart, and begin to draw from treasures old (Ben Sira) and new (early Christian texts).

Here is Pirkei Avot 3:5; its message is radical in the best sense of the word:

רבי נחוניא בן הקנה אומר:
כל המקבל עליו על תורה
מעבירין ממנו על מלכות
ועל דרך ארץ
וכל הפורק ממנו על תורה
נותנין עליו על מלכות
ועל דרך ארץ

Rabbi Nehunya ben Hakkanah says:

Everyone who takes upon himself the yoke of Torah,
from him is removed the yoke of the government
and the yoke of worldly cares.

but whoever tears away from himself the yoke of Torah,
upon him is imposed the yoke of the government
and the yoke of worldly cares.