The times they are a-changing. High definition images of ancient manuscripts are fast becoming available online. In this post, I argue that the generally available and generally cited translations of “a passage” in Ahiqar in which חכמה wisdom is thought to be personified are unreliable. It’s easy to check the matter out for oneself. Excellent photographs of the passage – really, two passages – are readily available because the plate volume of Sachau 1911, the editio princeps, has been digitized and put online. Here and here, to be exact. Thank you, Kate Farnworth. I hereby blow you a virtual kiss.

What a difference a nun makes. If you are scratching your head at this point, that’s because you’re not thinking in Aramaic. You are probably still thinking about Kate Farnworth (it’s a fair surmise she’s not a nun). This post might be more aptly titled: what a difference it makes to read a text, not in translation according to this or that reconstruction, but from an ancient manuscript in the language in which it was composed, on the basis of high-quality images and expert copies.

The example to be discussed: the first passage Bernhard Lang discusses in his entry on “Wisdom” in the Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible (1999:900), a passage held up as the first attestation of the personification of חכמה wisdom in the ancient Near East, found in a capital text of ancient literature, אحياר Ahiqar, strangely absent from the collection of translations in COS (The Context of Scripture, 3 vols., ed. by William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr.). My point: things look rather different depending on whether one reads the passage in translation as found in OTP 2, LAPO, and TUAT, or in the original, as found in the excellent photos of the editio princeps and as presented in the standard critical edition, TAD C1.1.

Here is the text and translation offered by James Lindenberger (1983: 68); translation = OTP 2: 499.

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(94b) [טְמוּנָה] וַעֲמָמוֹת
(95) [אָלָהָא ה] [לְהֵדָת]

From heaven the peoples are favored; Wisdom is of the gods.
Indeed, she is precious to the gods; Her kingdom is eternal.
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She has been established by Šamayn; Yea, the Holy Lord has exalted her.

Michael V. Fox (2000:332) follows the reconstruction, but translates otherwise:

From heaven the peoples receive favor; Wisdom is from the gods.
Also, she is precious to the gods; Rulership is hers forever.
She/it has been placed in heaven, because the lord of the holy ones has exalted her.

Fox’s translation is preferable. Rulership is hers sticks to the syntax of the reconstructed text more than her kingdom. Placed in heaven seems more likely than established by Šamayn; a god Šamayn is not elsewhere attested in Ahiqar, or anywhere else for that matter. It is more natural to take כי to be a subordinating syntactic operator per the usual, because rather than yea, a poorly attested and perhaps non-existent meaning. Based on analogous expressions found elsewhere, the lord of the holy ones is a more probable construal of כה than the Holy Lord.

Here is the text and translation offered by Ingo Kottsieper (1990:11-12); translation = TUAT 3:335-336; stichographic arrangement follows Lindenberger:

Column IX=53 line 16b (183)

Column X=54 line 1 (184)

Kottsieper’s reconstruction differs from that adopted by Lindenberger and Fox in two loci. (1) “[Their wisdom] the gods have declared” instead of “Wisdom is of the gods.” (2) “With her together with their Lord” is dominion” instead of “Her kingdom is eternal.” On Kottsieper’s reconstruction, there is a reference to the joint rule of wisdom with the high god of the pantheon.

Would you bet your copy of BHQ Proverbs on the reconstruction adopted by Lindenberger and Fox – and by Cowley, Grelot, and Ginsberg before them (with
differences in detail)? On that proposed by Kottsieper? Probably not. In fact, you probably wouldn’t bet a lowly cappuccino on either of the cited reconstructions.

This becomes clear as soon as one examines the details of the manuscript in the excellent photos available online (here and here) and as copied by Yardeni in Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni 1993 (TAD C).

First of all, Lindenberger’s lines 94b and 95 belong to materially unrelated sheets/columns of the manuscript. It is not at all clear that line 95 is the continuation of 94b. Another way of saying the same thing: it is not at all clear that Kottsieper’s Column “IX” is the continuation of Column “IX.”

Porten and Yardeni argue, based on an analysis of the succession of Egyptian months in the erased Customs Account underneath the Ahiqar text, that Sachau 44 and 45 / Cowley 53 and 54 / Kottsieper IX and X are not sequential (1993: 23). They propose that four columns are missing between their “Column 5 [D]” and “Column 6 [E].” TAD C.1.1 Column 12 [J] = Sachau 44 = Cowley 53 = Kottsieper Column IX. TAD C.1.1 Column 6 [E] = Sachau Tafel 45 = Cowley 54 = Kottsieper Column X.

The reconstructed order of sheets adopted by Sachau, Cowley, Grelot, Lindenberger, and Kottsieper – all of whom make Sachau Tafel 45 the direct continuation of Tafel 44 – no longer inspires confidence. In the new edition of the Aramaic manuscript found in Schwiderski (2004: 83-104), TAD C’s reconstruction, not that of the above scholars (synoptic tables of divergences in reconstruction in Lindenberger 1983: 36; Schwiderski 2004: 84, 94) forms the basis of the presentation. In response to Porten and Yardeni’s proposal, Kottsieper (2008:110-11; 2009:412-414) notes that their reordering of the sheets is not necessarily correct in all instances. He makes a case for the conclusion that prose narrative formed a frame around the proverbs. Nonetheless, his return to the former conjecture that Sachau Tafel 45 is the direct continuation of Tafel 44 lacks a convincing foundation.

Secondly, apart from the fact that Lindenberger’s lines 94b and 95 and Kottsieper’s Columns IX and X need to be decoupled, the details of their divergent reconstructions of content need to be re-examined. With just cause, Yardeni’s copies in TAD are now considered to be the standard edition of all the Egyptian-Aramaic texts TAD covers. In addition to the plates of the editio princeps, it is TAD C1.1, text and translation, not Lindenberger (1983; 1985) or Kottsieper (1990; 1991), that must be the point of departure of scholars interested in the Aramaic Ahiqar tradition.

In particular, the partially preserved letter following the fully preserved ב in Lindenberger 95 / Kottsieper X:1 (184) / TAD C.1.1:79 cannot plausibly be reconstructed to be a ט per Cowley and Lindenberger. The tail extends too far down. A synoptic comparison of examples of the relevant letters in context in the photograph of the edition princeps, magnified 50%, leads to this conclusion. Far more probably, it is a ד (as Yardeni and Porten suggest), a נ (as Kottsieper suggests), or a מ. No more “her kingship is eternal.” What a difference a nun makes.

To a large degree, the Aramaic Ahiqar tradition remains to be discovered by biblical scholars and scholars of antiquity. The persnickety student will be a doubting Thomas, unsatisfied until she sets eyes on the best evidence available, in the form of high-quality 1/23/2010
images and copies prepared by an expert paleographer. With that in mind, it is possible to take another look at the lines introduced above. The contents of both Sachau 44 line 16b = TAD C.1.1:189b (Column 12, line 16b) and Sachau 45 line 1 = TAD C.1.1:1 (Column 5, line 1) deserve a fresh examination, with the photographs of the editio princeps and Yardeni’s copies in TAD C as my points of departure.

Sachau 44 line 16b = TAD C.1.1:189b (Column 12, line 16b)

[Stichographic arrangement follows Lindenberger]

From heaven the peoples were [ ];

the[ir] [wi]sdom the gods caused to [ ].

Allowing for different habits of marking partially preserved letters, the text I offer is identical to that of TAD C except in one detail:

A partially preserved \( \text{ו} \) before \( \text{ח} \) \( \text{כמתה} \) \( \text{ם} \) \( \text{Their wisdom} \) is not visible in Sachau 44. Go here. It’s as if a fragment with a fragmentary \( \text{ו} \) was found that matched the lacuna in question.

Based on the preserved traces, it is natural to suppose that \( \text{ו} \) \( \text{ט} \) \( \text{י} \) \( \text{ם} \) is a verb with \( \text{ופל} \) \( \text{אخير} \) \( \text{אלהי} \) \( \text{מ} \) \( \text{The peoples} \) as subject, and that \( \text{ר} \) \( \text{חכמתה} \) \( \text{מ} \) \( \text{Their wisdom} \) appears to be a plausible reconstruction given the scope of the lacunae and the preceding \( \text{אמר} \) \( \text{אخير} \) \( \text{אלהי} \) \( \text{מ} \) \( \text{The peoples} \) to which the pronoun may refer. Porten and Yardeni (1993:49) and Kottsieper (1990:12) reconstruct accordingly.

The reconstruction adopted by Lindenberger (1983:68) runs as follows:

From heaven the peoples are favored; Wisdom is of the gods.

were favored, a conjecture of Grelot 1971 adopted by many, is not particularly felicitous. The verb \( \text{ט} \) in Aramaic languages is poorly attested, never, in any case, in the G passive binyan. In Syriac, the Gt occurs, meaning to find favor in a situation of need. It isn’t clear why a putative From heaven the peoples found favor should be followed by a putative wisdom is of the gods. The logical connection binding the parts of the reconstructed sequence is weak.

\( \text{ומ} \) \( \text{חכמתה} \) \( \text{אתר} \) \( \text{אלהי} \) \( \text{מ} \) \( \text{Their wisdom} \) of/from is implausible on its own. The lacuna is not large enough to contain the reconstructed sequence. That being the case, \( \text{ר} \) \( \text{י} \) \( \text{אתר} \) \( \text{אלהי} \) \( \text{מ} \) \( \text{She is} \) becomes implausible as well.
Kottsieper (1990:12) reconstructs as follows:

*לפי* [lapidary א] *

*ות finns* [C] *

they made known is problematic. It forms, in combination with the preceding context, an idea unattested elsewhere.

Porten and Yardeni (1993:48-49) chose not to adopt earlier conjectures in the following cases: [ ] and [ ] . This is the prudent thing to do.

The reconstruction I would offer, to be taken with a grain of salt, moves in a different direction. A number of sayings in Ahiqar which involve the gods are acerbic in content. With that as a point of departure, I would reconstruct the “one-liner” as follows:

*אלוהים המן שמין* [lapidary] *

From heaven the peoples are [judged];
the[ir] [wis]dom the gods re[move].

I do not retain in translation the past presentation of the original. The reconstructed perfects correspond to omnitemporal aorists in Greek.

The results so far are clear. Sachau 44 line 16b = TAD C.1.1:189b is not evidence for a personification of wisdom in Ahiqar. For heuristic purposes, here is a translation of the passage into Tiberian biblical Aramaic and Hebrew.

**Biblical Aramaic**

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[ ] [lapidary] *

**Biblical Hebrew**

*םיימשא* [lapidary] *

Sachau 45 line 1 = TAD C.1.1:1 (Column 5, line 1)

[Stichographic arrangement follows Lindenberger]

*מלכותאשמ֯ב* [lapis] *

To gods, moreover, she is pre[c]ious;
With[th her] kingdoms.

In heav[e]n she is set,
for the Lord of the holy ones exalted [her].

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Porten and Yardeni (1993:36-37), though they decouple these two lines from the “one-liner” discussed here, nonetheless understand the two-line unit to attest to the personification of wisdom. This seems right, since there is no other obvious referent to the twice-repeated ד she in context. Allowing for different habits of marking partially preserved letters, the text I offer is identical to that of TAD C except in one detail:

Here is the text and translation found in Lindenberger (1983: 68); translation = OTP 2: 499.

Here is the text and translation found in Kottsieper (1990:11-12); translation = TUAT 3:335-336; stichographic arrangement follows Lindenberger:

Auch bei den Göttern ist sie ge[e]ehrt;
mit [ihr zusammen] ist [ihren Herrn] die Herrschaft.
In den Himmel ist sie gesetzt;
ja, der Herr der Heiligen hat [sie] erhöht.

The partially preserved letter following the fully preserved י cannot plausibly be reconstructed to be a ג per Cowley and Lindenberger. The tail extends too far down. A synoptic comparison of examples of the relevant letters in context in the photograph of the edition princeps, magnified 50%, leads to this conclusion. Far more probably, it is a ד (as Yardeni and Porten suggest), a מ (as Kottsieper suggests), or a כ. In that case, there is no “her kingship is eternal” to reconstruct here.
followed by Porten and Yardeni who refrain from conjectures in this instance. Kottsieper himself (2009:420) subsequently took this path.

There is not enough preserved context to determine if מלכותא is singular or plural. If for no other reason than to aver that a reference to Wisdom’s kingship / dominion is by no means certain in this locus, I propose that the sense is kingdoms. Wi[th] wisdom, kingdoms thrive, or something to that effect.

The expression בעל קדшив Lord of the Holy Ones is not otherwise attested, but is understandable as a reference to the high god of the pantheon as lord over the aggregate of divine beings in light of related expressions found in ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, and Phoenician (Parker 1999).

For heuristic purposes, here is a translation of the passage into Tiberian biblical Aramaic and Hebrew.

**Biblical Aramaic**

אף לארהים יכינה היא
עמל[ב]המלכות
בשם[יו] שימחה היא
רי בנה קדישין נשא[ה]

**Biblical Hebrew**

אף לארהים יכינה היא
עמל[ב]המלכות
בשם[יו] שימחה היא
רי בנה קדישין נשא[ה]

In short, Sachau 45 line 1 = TAD C.1.1:1 (Column 5, line 1) is a text of great interest even if reconstructions of its lacunae proposed in the past fail to inspire confidence. Certainty is lacking, but it is reasonable to suggest that wisdom is the personified referent of the twice repeated יכינה היא. The chief god of the pantheon, the Lord of the Holy Ones, exalted her. She is set in the heavens. She is precious to the gods, and has, if the understanding of the broken context proposed above is given credence, a positive relationship with kingdoms.

The conceptualizations of wisdom of the kind reconstructed here do not seem out of place in Ahiqar, a text of the 7th or 6th cent. BCE the aphorisms of which seem to have originated in Syria as opposed to Mesopotamia. The conceptualizations do not have precise analogues in Proverbs 1-9, possibly to be dated to the same time frame, or elsewhere in the Bible, but they make sense as exemplifications of the deep background of passages in which wisdom is personified (Prov 1:20-33; 8:1-35; 9:1-18).

1 Already in antiquity, the work in question tends to be titled Ahiqar. Based on the opening words of the work in Aramaic, the language in which the work was composed, it
might be titled the Pronouncements of Ahiqar (TAD C.1.1.1). Compare Jer 1:1; Prov 31:1.

Bibliography