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Summary

In the Hebrew text of the Wisdom of Ben Sira (Ms B IX verso, line 12 = Or. 1102), the final word of 40:4 has been misread in past editions and commentaries. New digital photographs reveal that the word in question is סיגה "flax, linen," a word previously unattested in Hebrew.

In previous editions of the Wisdom of Ben Sira, the traces of letters at the end of Ms B IX verso (Or. 1102), line 12 (= Sir 40:4) are often indicated as indecipherable (e.g., see the transliterations of Cowley-Neubauer, Ben-Hayyim, Beentjes, Abegg).¹ Those scholars who do attempt to make sense of the marks have read them in basically two ways: either as שְׂמֵלֶת עוֹר "leather garment" (so Lévi) or as שְׂמֵלֶת שֵׁעַר [יר] "hair garment" (so Smend).² Lévi cites a parallel expression in Gen 3:21: כְּתוּנֹת עוֹר "garments of skin"; this allusion to the Garden of Eden story is intriguing since the same story is also echoed in the phrase אִם כָּל חַי "mother of all the living" found two lines above, in Ms B IX verso (Or. 1102), line 10 (= Sir 40:1), which phrase refers to the earth in Sir 40:1, but refers to Eve in Gen 3:20. Smend, for

1. A. E. Cowley and A. Neubauer, *The Original Hebrew of a Portion of Ecclesiasticus, XXXIX.15 to XLIX.11, together with the Early Versions and an English Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1897), 4; Z. Ben-Hayyim, *The Book of Ben Sira: Text, Concordance and an Analysis of the Vocabulary* (The Historical Dictionary of the Hebrew Language; Jerusalem: Academy of the Hebrew Language, 1973), 42; Pancratius C. Beentjes, *The Book of Ben Sira in Hebrew: A Text Edition of All Extant Hebrew Manuscripts and a Synopsis of All Parallel Hebrew Ben Sira Texts* (VTSup 68; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 69; Martin Abegg, "Ben Sira," in Accordance Bible Software (Altamonte Springs, Fla.: Oak Tree Software, 2007, 2009).

2. I. Lévi, *L'Ecclésiastique* (2 vols.; Paris: Leroux, 1898-1901), 1:14; ; Rudolf Smend, *Die Weisheit des Jesus Sirach, hebräisch und deutsch* (Berlin: Reimer, 1906), Heb 38; idem, *Die Weisheit des Jesus Sirach, erklärt* (Berlin: Reimer, 1906), 369. M. Z. Segal (*Sefer Ben Sira* [2nd ed.; Jerusalem: Bialik, 1958], 266) reconstructs according to Lévi's reading, while N. Peters (*Der jüngst wiederaufgefundene hebräische Text des Buches Ecclesiasticus* [Freiburg: Herdersche, 1902], 174, 390) follows Smend.

his part, notes the parallel expression אדרת שער "cloak of hair" in Gen 25:25 and Zech 13:4, in the latter passage in a reference to prophets.³ Subsequent translations, if they follow the Hebrew, follow one or the other proposal.⁴ In any case, neither of these suggestions can be followed. New photographs reveal that the word in question is neither עור nor שער, but rather a word previously unknown in Hebrew, סיגה "flax, linen."⁵

In order to make the context of the word clearer, we provide below our reading and translation of the entire bicolon:

מעוטה צניף וציץ ועד עוטה שמלת סיגה [:]	עד	from the one wrapping himself in turban and rosette, and to the one wrapping himself in a linen garment -- Margin: to
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The verse exhibits various curious features, including the *waw* conjunction at the beginning of the second colon (which seems to be a mistake that is corrected in the margin). But, we refrain from commenting in detail on these other features here in order to focus on the bicolon's last word.

Based on the digital photographs, all the letters of the last word are attested to some degree. (See the photograph and drawing provided in the appendix.) The *samekh* is visible in its diagonal right line, as well as its bottom corner and part of the left vertical stroke. Furthermore, the edge of the hole (just above the vertical mark) matches the shape of a *samekh*'s up-

3. Segal (*Sefer Ben Sira*, 268), however, observes that a "cloak of hair" seems to be a "cloak of glory" in Zech 13:4, associated with prophets.

4. E.g., Patrick W. Skehan and Alexander A. Di Lella (*The Wisdom of Ben Sira* [AB 39; New York: Doubleday, 1987], 465) follow Smend's reading, while B. M. Zapff (*Jesus Sirach 25-51* [Die Neue Echter Bibel; Würzburg: Echter, 2010], 276) follows Lévi. Alternatively, many translate less literally, from context; John G. Snaith (*Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach* [Cambridge Bible Commentary; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press], 196) renders the phrase "sackcloth."

5. Photos are available at <https://fgp.genizah.org> and at genizah.bodleian.ox.ac.uk. Before publication of these photographs, scholars often relied on the facsimile edition of the manuscripts, published as *Facsimiles of the Fragments Hitherto Recovered of The Book of Ecclesiasticus in Hebrew* (London: Oxford Univeristy Press / Cambridge Univeristy Press, 1901).

per left corner (with the characteristic flourish). The letter's narrowness makes it impossible that the marks could be an *'ayin* or a *śin/šin*. The only possibility seems to be to interpret the letter as *samekh*. The bottom of the *yodh* is clear, just beneath the hole. The *gimmel* is discernible based on its vertical line that curves slightly to the left at its bottom, where it extends beneath the base line. In addition, its distinctive bottom horizontal line is clear.

What we read as a *heh* is visible only in the bottom tip of its left leg, which appears on the bottom edge of the preceding hole. Perhaps also there exists a very faint trace of its upper right corner above the hole. Since there is so little of the letter left, it is not surprising that the mark(s) can be read in different ways. The mark above the hole could simply be a discoloration of the paper. And, the mark on the bottom edge could be the remnant of the lower dot of the *soph pasuq*, which mark indicates the end of each line of text in Ms B. This would result in the reading סִיג . This reading seems unlikely for three reasons.

First, in most cases the *soph pasuq* is oriented slightly above the base line. The mark in question, by contrast, seems to be well beneath the base line on which the other letters sit; it is at the same height as the bottom tip of the *gimmel*. Even if the piece of paper on which this mark is preserved should be elevated slightly (as explained below), we would not expect the bottom dot of the *soph pasuq* to be so low. Second, if the mark in question is the bottom dot of a *soph pasuq*, then it is unusually far from the last letter of the line.⁶ Third, although words with the letters סִיג do occur in Biblical and Rabbinic Hebrew (as noted below), their meanings do not fit the context of this verse.

By contrast, the reading of the mark in question as the bottom most tip of a *heh*'s left leg fits well the width of the hole; in addition, this reading agrees with the sense of the verse when cognate evidence from Aramaic is taken into consideration (as explained below). The lowness of the mark is, at first glance, still a problem; we would expect the left leg of a *heh* to

6. This includes the instances where *gimmel* is the final letter of the line, as with תַּעֲנִיג in Ms B X verso (MS heb e.62), line 7 (= Sir 41:1); and אֲוִיג in Ms B XIV verso (MS heb e.62), line 12 (= Sir 45:11).

rest on the same line as the horizontal stroke of the *gimmel*, or, at most, to extend just slightly beneath the line (cf. the *heh* of שאלה "request" in Ms B, [MS.Heb.e.62] XI recto, line 15 [= Sir 41:19]). It seems likely to us, therefore, that the tear in the paper just above this mark has resulted in this piece of paper moving down. If the paper is lifted slightly so that the two edges along the tear are brought closer together, the mark in question (what we read as the bottom tip of the left leg of a *heh*) rests on the same line as the preceding *samekh* of סִיגָה as well as the letters of שמלת (see the drawing in the appendix). The mark is still lower than the horizontal line of the *gimmel*, but this is likely due to the fact that the *gimmel* is written slightly higher than the preceding letters. Such a variation in orientation between consecutive letters is not uncommon in Ms B.⁷

Further evidence for our reading סִיגָה and its sense as "flax, linen" is provided by the Greek translation. The phrase שמלת סִיגָה "linen garment" in Hebrew corresponds to the Greek translation ὠμόλινον, "raw flax, coarse linen towel or napkin" (LSJ). The Greek word occurs nowhere else in the LXX, but is attested many times in classical and early Christian literature.⁸ It is most commonly used to indicate flax, but indicates a linen garment in, among other places, Plutarch (Moralia, De Garrulitate 509a), where it describes the apron or bib that barbers affix to a customer (in this case to a king).⁹ In addition, in the Shepherd of Hermas (Similitude 8.4, 1 = Chap. 70, sect. 1, line 3 [twice]), it indicates a coarse loincloth made from a sack.¹⁰

7. Note, for example, how in the phrase יודע מלחמות "(a person) knowing wars" in Ms B (MS.Heb.e.62) XVI verso, line 10 (= Sir 47:5), the letters of יודע fall on the same base line, though the *mem* rests significantly above the line and the *het* and following letters are somewhat below the base line of יודע.

8. TLG (the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae; stephanus.tlg.uci.edu [accessed July 14, 2015]) lists 26 occurrences in ancient Greek literature.

9. It occurs in the Plutarch passage with the same verb as in Sir 40:4, περιβάλλω.

10. In the Shepherd of Hermas, the word is once qualified as being ἐκ σάκκου "of sack," indicating presumably its coarseness and the material's origin as an actual sack. The Greek word ὠμόλινον appears in the Lives of Aesop where it indicates a "linen sack for carrying vegetables" (LSJ, Supplement).

The Syriac has *lbwš' dmsknwt'* "garment of poverty." Presumably, this reflects the metaphoric sense of clothing made of coarse fabric.

The word סִיגָה is not otherwise found in Hebrew. However, its cognate is found in Palestinian Aramaic dialects, specifically in Galilean Aramaic of the Palestinian Talmud (γ. *B. Qam.* 5c:35 = chap. 6, *ḥalkah* 7 [T-S 12.741 II verso, line 29]) (the sack) was full of flax"¹¹ and of Vayyikra Rabba (494:3 = chap. 22:1 [Ms Munich 117]) flax for weaving cords."¹² In addition, it also appears apparently in Christian Palestinian Aramaic, without a mater *yodh*, in two translations of Isaiah 43:17, both in a single lectionary (*le97*): lection 30 טפֿיא דסגתא דספֿיא "they are extinguished as a flaxen wick is extinguished," and lection 55 טפֿו היך דסגתא כד טפֿיא "they are extinguished like a flaxen wick when it is extinguished."¹³

11. This and the following reference are drawn from the CAL (The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon), cal1.cn.huc.edu (accessed July 13, 2015). The translation of the phrase from the Palestinian Talmud is from *DJPA*. The Aramaic is quoted from a Genizah text; see Louis Ginzberg, *Yerushalmi Fragments from the Genizah: Texts with Various Readings from the Editio Princeps* (vol. 1; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1909), 245. This reading is preferred, though it differs from that of the Leiden manuscript (MS Leiden, Scaliger 3), which has, instead, סִיגִין הוּה מלא "the sack) was full of dross" (*Talmud Yerushalmi, According to Ms. Or. 4720 (Scal. 3) of the Leiden University Library with Restorations and Corrections* [ed. Y. Sussmann; Jerusalem: ???, 2001], ???) and that of MS Escorial, which has סִיגִין הוּה מלי (see E. S. Rosenthal and S. Lieberman, *Yershualmi Neziqin, Edited from the Escorial Manuscript* [Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1983], 23). The reading סִיגָה is preferred since it forms a more logical match with "silk" (מטקסין in Scaliger 3; מטכסין in MS Escorial) in this passage.

12. The CAL groups the instance in Vayyikra Rabba 494:3 under the lemma סִיגָה, though *DJPA* (Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period*, 2nd edition [Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002], s.v) lists this instance under the lemma סִיג, which is glossed simply as "uncertain." The English translation above follows the translation of CAL. The Aramaic quotation is from MS Munich 117. Other manuscripts and editions of the text have, instead, either some form of סִיב "fibrous substance" or סִיכָה "nail." Together with the other variants in the text, all of these words could fit the context. See the commentary and variants in Mordecai Margulies, *Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah: A Critical Edition Based on Manuscripts and Genizah Fragments with Variants and Notes* (5 vols.; Jerusalem: Ministry of Education and Culture of Israel, 1953), 3:494.

13. The Aramaic text is cited from Agnes Smith et al., *A Palestinian Syriac Lectionary* (Studia Sinaitica VI; London: C. J. Clay and Sons, 1897), 35 and 76. Again, the definition and identification are based on CAL. Since the CPA Old Testament is usually based on the LXX (see M. Goshen-Gottstein, *The Bible in the Syropalestinian Version, Part I: Pentateuch and Prophets* [Jerusalem: ???, 1973], viii-ix) and since סגתא corresponds with LXX λίνον (which may imply flax or something made from flax, including presumably a wick), the

A similarly spelled Hebrew noun, סִיג, meaning "luxuriant growth, sproutings," appears in the Mishnah (*m. 'Uq. 1:2*) and other Rabbinic writings (see Jastrow); the word is associated with the common root סג or שג, "to be much, increase." The Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic literature also contain a homonym, סִיג, meaning "dross," which is related to the verb סוג "to withdraw." Neither of these words fits the context of Sir 40:4.

The root from which the Hebrew word סִיגה derives is unknown. One might assume it derives from the root סוג or שוג "to fence in," which appears in the Bible. *HALOT* list the *qal* verb as appearing in Song 7:3, while *BDB* list the *qal* form as well as a *pilpel* form of the verb in Isa 17:11.¹⁴ Another Hebrew word related to this root appears in Rabbinic Hebrew, סִיג "fence, hedge." If this etymology is correct, presumably the word סִיגה developed to indicate coarse flax/linen, based on an association with twigs and other abrasive material used for fencing.¹⁵

In Classical Hebrew, of course, we already have words for "flax" and "linen." The word פשתה indicates the plant (as well as "wick," which was presumably made from the plant), and the plural form פשתים indicates "flax" or the fabric "linen." These words are complemented by the word פשתן "flax," which occurs in the Mishnah and later literature. In addi-

meaning of סגתא as "flax" or "flaxen wick" seems likely. Nevertheless, both dictionaries of CPA do not define the word, but refer to its meaning as "obscure" (F. Schulthess, *Lexicon Syropalaestinum* [Berlin: Reimer, 1903], s.v) or "uncertain" (Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Christian Palestinian Aramaic* [OLA 234; Leuven: Peeters, 2014], s.v.). The word סגתא corresponds with the Hebrew word פשתה in Isa 43:17, which Hebrew word is defined as either "flax" or "wick," though in the context it probably means "wick." The Targum has בוֹצִין "lamp, light," which itself looks close to the Hebrew and Aramaic word בוֹץ "linen," though בוֹצִין is perhaps a loan from another language (as it might be in Akkadian too, where it occurs as buṣinnu). See Stephen A. Kaufman, *The Akkadian Influences on Aramaic* (AS 19; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 45. The link between CPA סגתא and the Palestinian Talmud was made by E. S. Rosenthal (see Rosenthal and Lieberman, *Yershualmi Neziqin*, 120).

14. A phonetically similar Biblical Hebrew root is שֹׁך from which derives the verb "to hedge," שֹׁך "branch," and שֹׁכָה "branch."

15. Alternatively, one wonders if the word סִיגה has anything to do with the Akkadian words *sinkum*, *singu*, and perhaps *siggu*, defined in the *CAD* as "wool" (*The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, Volume S* [ed. John A. Brinkman, et al.; Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1984], s.v.) and in *CDA* as "discarded wool" (*A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian* [ed. Jeremy Black, et al.; 2nd ed.; SANTAG 5; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000], s.v.).

tion, high-quality linen is referred to in Biblical Hebrew as **לִישׁ** and **בֹּרֵךְ**. The reason for using the word **סִיגָה** in Sir 40:4 instead of one of these other words is suggested by its presumed nuance. The words **שֵׁשׁ** and **בֹּרֵךְ** are inappropriate, of course, since they indicate fine linen and the context calls for a coarse fabric, characteristic of the poor. On the other hand, the words **פִּשְׁתִּים** and **פִּשְׁתָּה** (as well as **פִּשְׁתָּן**) seem to be neutral terms, indicating simply the material, flax (e.g., Prov 31:13), or the garments made from flax (either undergarments, as in Jer 13:1, or priestly vestments, as in Ezek 44:17). Such garments (i.e., garments made of **פִּשְׁתִּים**) must have been worn by many people, not just the destitute and poor.

We conjecture that the word **סִיגָה** is used in Sir 40:4 since it indicates a particularly coarse kind of flax or linen. This would seem to parallel the nuance of the Aramaic word where it appears as the material from which cords are made (Vayyikra Rabba 494:3 [= 22:1]). Furthermore, this sense for **סִיגָה** (preceded by **שְׁמֵלֶת**) matches perfectly the meaning of the Greek translation ὠμόλινον. Such a sense of **סִיגָה** would fit the context particularly well, since here we expect the opposite of wealthy attire, referred to in 40:4a. This kind of opposition is part of a broader rhetoric in the poem. The preceding two bicola express the entire range of human life and society through merismatic matches: "God has apportioned great anxiety . . . from the day (a person) leaves (his) mother's womb, until he returns to the mother of all the living, (for) the one dwelling on a throne . . . to the one dressing in dirt and ash" (40:1-3).¹⁶ If 40:4 had instead **פִּשְׁתִּים**, then the contrast would be between those who wear refined dress and those who wear simple clothing. The word **סִיגָה**, on the other hand, not only implies a contrast between refined and simple clothing, but also a contrast between the wealthy and poor, between the elite and the lower-classes, and this contrast better functions as a merismatic pair, indicating everyone in society.

16. The translation "to the one dressing" translates the first marginal alternative, **לְיֹשֵׁב**, which corresponds to **לְשׁוֹב** in the text.

At the same time, of course, it must be admitted that we cannot be sure that the word סִיגָה was present in the original Ben Sira text. Nor, for that matter, can it be determined whether or not Ben Sira knew of such a word. The fact that the Aramaic cognates of סִיגָה only appear in rather late forms of Aramaic would seem to argue for it being a secondary feature of Ben Sira's text, added by a later scribe. The question must remain unresolved for the time being. Either Ben Sira knew this word and used it here, or his text (which would otherwise presumably have contained a word like פִּשְׁתִּים) was improved upon by a later scribe who, perhaps, borrowed a word from Aramaic to give Ben Sira's proverb a more precise and accurate sense.

The significance of the discovery of the word סִיגָה in Ben Sira is threefold. First, it reflects a word hitherto unknown in Hebrew and, therefore, contributes to our knowledge of the Hebrew lexicon. Second, the word brings into relief the presumed analogy in the text, between fine, decorative clothing of the most wealthy and powerful and the coarse, utilitarian clothing of the poor.¹⁷ Third, the context of Sir 40:4 and the corresponding Greek translation of סִיגָה seem to add further evidence for the sense of the Aramaic cognates סִיגָא (in Vayikra Rabba) and סִגְתָא (in Christian Palestinian Aramaic) as "flax" or "product made from flax."

17. Previous readings and reconstructions partially reflect this sense, but add allusions to the text that are really not present (i.e., the allusion to the garments of skin made for Adam and Eve or to the clothing of prophets).



Illustration 1: The word ܐܝܢ in Ms B IX verso (Or. 1102), line 12 (= Sir 40:4). Printed with the Permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.



Illustration 2: Drawing of the word ܐܝܢ with the tear in the manuscript rejoined in Ms B IX verso (Or. 1102), line 12 (= Sir 40:4). Printed with the Permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.