

‘To Grasp the Hem’ and 1 Samuel 15:27

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With respect to 1 Sam. 15:27, much has been said in the past to resolve the question of exactly whose cloak was torn when Samuel turned to depart. In the following observations, an attempt will be made to determine that, on the basis of the use of the motif of “grasping the hem” in ancient near eastern literature, there can be no doubt that in fact, in a context of intense tragic irony, it was Saul who inadvertently and disasterously tore the garment of Saul.

The text of 1 Sam 15:27 reads:

wysb šmw’l lkt wyh̄zq bknp m’y’lw wyqr’

Samuel turned to depart but he took hold of the hem of his cloak and it tore.

The text here does nothing to clarify adequately precisely whose garment was torn. The LXX, in perceiving this lack of textual clarity attempted to set matters straight by introducing two changes; firstly, Saul is read as the actor in the tearing of the garment, and secondly, the Hebrew *wayyiqqāra’*, vocalized in the passive, is rendered by the LXX in the equivalent of the Hebrew *wayyiqra’ēbū*, the active plus the third person pronominal suffix.¹ The Targum for our passage does not aid in clarifying the problem under discussion. It has rendered a literal translation of the verse and, unlike the LXX, has not added the name Saul nor departed from reproducing the passive nature of the Hebrew *wayyiqqāra’*:

w’sth̄r šmw’l lm’zl w’tq bknp m’ylyb w’tbz’

On the other hand, the Pešitta seems to follow exactly the tendency of the LXX as it renders:

w’tpny šmw’yl lm’zl w’bd š’wl bknp’ dprysb wšryby

Samuel turned to depart and Saul grasped the hem of his cloak and tore it.

The Vulgate does little to clarify the textual difficulty under discussion: the subject of the second part of this compound sentence is still not clear although the use of *ille*, ‘however’, in reproducing the *waw* of *wayyaḥāzēq* might, by virtue of some of the peculiar aspects

1 It is unfortunate that *Biblia Hebraica*, ad. loc., does not note these problems. The LXX for our passage reads: *kai epestrepse Samouēl to prosōpon auto tou apeltheim kai ekratēse Saoul tou pterugiou tēs diploidos auto kai dierrēxen auto.*

of Latin syntax, point to Saul who is mentioned directly in verse 26 and indirectly in verse 28:

Et conversus est Samuel ut abiret: ille autem apprehendit summitatem palii eius, quae et scissa est.

Yalqut Shimoni, in reporting an old rabbinic discussion, notes clearly the textual difficulty under discussion and comments thusly:²

*m'ylw šl my ? rb wlyw ḥd 'mr m'ylw šl š'wl wḥd 'mr m'ylw šl šmw'l. 'mr rb šmw'l
br nḥmny nr'yn ḥdbrym knp m'ylw šl šmw'l škn drk ḥšdyqym lbywt mš'ryn bš'h
š'yn nṭy'tn mšbḥt*³

Whose cloak? Rab and Levi: one said, "the hem of the cloak of Saul" and the other said, "the hem of the cloak of Samuel." Rabbi Samuel bar Naḥmani said, "Apparently the text refers to the hem of the cloak of Samuel considering that it is usual for the righteous to grieve when their intention is not honored . . ."⁴

Rashi took note of the rabbinic discussion above and added:

According to the plain meaning, the intention is that when Samuel turned to depart from Saul, Saul grasped the hem of Samuel because Saul was importuning him that he return until he might worship in Gilgal because the Tent of Meeting was there . . .

Significant for our discussion as it will develop below is Rashi's thought that it was Saul who grasped the hem of Samuel's cloak. As will be demonstrated, the grasping of the hem of a garment has, among others, the signification of 'supplication, importuning, submission'.⁵

Ferris J. Stephens, in his article on "The Ancient Significance of Šiṣīth,"⁶ attempted to demonstrate that the grasping of the corner of a garment (Sumerian TÚG.SÍG, Akkadian *sissiktum*) (a) had magical powers,⁷ (b) demonstrated an act of special piety,⁸ and (c) expressed coercive power over another person.⁹ What seems clear and better substantiated

2 Yalqut Shimoni (Jerusalem, 1960), 2:724.

3 See the continuation of this passage wherein an analogy is brought concerning Ahijah the Shilonite (1 Kgs. 11:30).

4. Note the rabbinic word-play here: *š'r* 'to grieve' > *šrb* 'to be anguished, distressed' > *šry* 'to split, tear'. Note additionally that the Pešiṭta above renders Hebrew *qr* 'to tear' as *šry*!

5 M. Z. Segal, in his commentary on the Books of Samuel (*Sifre Šemuel* [Jerusalem, 1964], 125) on the basis of classical Hebrew style and syntax notes that: "*wayyiqra*" would support the opinion of one who would say that the cloak was Saul's and that Samuel intentionally tore it, but, if so, the text would have to say *wayyiqra'ēbū*, as with Ahijah the Shilonite in 1 Kings 11:30 . . ."

6 JBL 50 (1931), 59-70.

7 Ibid., 61.

8 Ibid., 62.

9 Ibid., 62, 68. In this particular instance, Stephens relied heavily upon the use of the grasping of the *sikku* 'hem' in some of the Cappadocian tablets. The references Stephens brings do not support the notion that the grasping of a person's garment is a ritualized or legalistic act of coercion—it is highly possible that in the texts he cites such instances are merely indicative of the importuning of the lender for repayment from the debtor. Additionally, Stephens cites several instances of the tearing of the *sissiktu* (pp. 64-65),

to us is that the grasping of the hem of a garment in ancient literature simply signifies 'supplication, importuning, submission to a superior'. For the notion of 'supplication', consider for example this citation from Ebeling, *Handerhebung*, 30:7 (= King, *BMS*, 4:29):

[ašhur]ki aše'ki sissiktaki ašbat kīma sissikti iliya u ištarrīya¹⁰

I turned to you and sought you; I seized your hem (= importuned) as the hem of my god and goddess.

Additionally, note Streck, *Asb.*, 262:27:

which was "a procedure partly religious, partly judicial, which materially altered one's station in society." Since the contexts for the sources which Stephens adduces involve only divorce proceedings, it is conceivable that the act of tearing was neither religious nor judicial but simply *symbolic of separation*! Moreover, attempts to identify the Akkadian *sikku* or *sissiktu* as 'a thread, a cord' and hence demonstrate a parallel for the Hebrew *šîṣit* are weak on several grounds. Firstly, as Stephens points out, *sissiktu* is equated with *edappātu* (see *AHw.*, 185a and 1050b) 'border of a garment' and hence, by metonymy, the garment itself (perhaps etymologically related to the Hebrew *m'ṭph*, 'cloak, mantle'); and secondly, Akkadian literature attests to a number of instances where the *sissiktu* is used to cover the face (page 65). Moreover, biblical literature, in speaking of the ritual fringes (*šîṣit*), consistently concerns itself with the *šîṣit* or *g'eḏilim* as the significance and not the corner (*kānāp*). Had Saul grasped the *šîṣit* of Samuel, as Stephens claims (page 69), it is highly unlikely that the author would have chosen to speak of the ritually meaningless *kānāp* and ignore the *šîṣit*.

D. Conrad in his article "Samuel und die Mari-'Propheten'," in W. Voight, ed., *XVII Deutscher Orientalistentag*, ZDMG Supplement 1 (Wiesbaden, 1969), 1:273-80, points to several Mari texts dealing with ecstasies (*ARM* XIII, 112; *ARM* VI, 45 and *RA* 42 [1948], 128f.) in an attempt to demonstrate that Saul ripped the seam of Samuel's cloak in order to dishonor Samuel and disempower him as a prophet. Further, Conrad notes that the cutting of the hair and the cloak of the Mari ecstatic demonstrated a mistrust of the divine message received, indicated a suspicion of false prophecy, and gave the state power (by having the hair and mantle sent to the king) over the prophet (pages 278-79). Conrad's argumentation is weak on a number of grounds. Firstly, *ARM* XIII, 112:16'-18' would indicate solely that the effect of cutting the hair and the cloak of the ecstatic had the function of preventing the ecstatic from prophesying further: *ištu ūm[im] šā[ti]tu šuḫārum [šā] maru[š]* "... since that day, that *šuḫārum* has been ill. Secondly, the Mari texts refer to *both* the cutting of hair *and* the tearing of the mantle whereas the Samuel text speaks *only* of the tearing of a garment. An argument can be made that the cutting of the ecstatic's hair was an attempt to remove his power in the light of the hair-cutting theme in Judges 16 and various sources adduced in T. H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament* (New York, 1969), 436-43. Lastly, Saul's comment to Samuel after the tearing of the cloak (verse 30): *hē'ty 'th kbdny n' ngd zqny 'my wgd ysr'l wšwb 'my wšthwty lybwb 'lbyk* "... I have sinned; now honor me vis-a-vis the elders of my people and vis-a-vis Israel and return with me and I shall prostrate myself before YHWH your God" clearly indicates rather Saul's contrition and submission to Samuel and in no way can be understood to support Conrad's notion that Saul, in tearing Samuel's cloak, sought to dishonor, disempower and silence the prophet (page 280).

10 See *AHw.*, 1051a (7). Careful note should also be taken of another example of this idea in Gadd, "The Harran Inscriptions of Nabonidus," *An. St.* 8 (1958), 46 *sissikti šm šar ilāni ašbatma mūši u urra ēnāya ittišu bašā ina supē u labān appi kummušāk ina maḥrišun* "I grasped the hem of Sin, King of the Gods, night and day; my two eyes were with him, in prayer and humility I bowed before them" Also Zech. 8:23 reflects the imagery of the grasping of the hem in conveying the idea of the submission of the nations to the superiority of the Judeans and their desire to make an alliance with them: *whḥzyqwb bknp 'yš ybwdy l'mr nkbh 'mkm ky šm'nw 'lbym 'mkm* "... they shall grasp the hem of the Judean saying: 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you'."

sissikti ilūtišu rabīti ašbat ašte'a ašrātēšu

I seized the hem (= supplicated) of his (Marduk's) great godship; I sought his shrines.

For the notion of submission to a superior¹¹ in Old Aramaic, see *KAI* 215:11:

py 'h̄z bkn̄p mr'h mlk 'šwr

He grasped the hem (= made an alliance) of his lord, the King of Assyria.

In consideration of the use of the theme "to grasp the hem" in literature cognate to the Hebrew Bible, the problematic passage in 1 Sam. 15:27 may be clarified. In a powerful moment of tragic irony Saul, having admitted his wrongdoing to Samuel, attempts to stay his angry departure by grasping the hem of Samuel's cloak—indicating at one and the same time *all* of the significations we have discussed above. Saul exclaims in verse 25:

w'th š'-n' h̄t' ty wšwb 'my w'stḥwb lyhwb

Forgive my error! Return with me and I shall prostrate myself before Yahweh!

Clearly, Saul supplicates Samuel, importunes him not to abandon him and submits himself of Samuel's (and God's) authority—all, both in word and in the deed of taking hold of Samuel's cloak. The tragic irony here is that Saul, in attempting to set matters aright, inadvertently tears Samuel's mantle and completely botches a potentially most significant and meaning-laden act—it is Samuel then who grasps the tearing of the garment to pronounce the penitent Saul's fate:

qr' yhwb 't mmlkw̄t ysr'l m'lyk-wntnh lr'k h̄twb mmk

Yahweh has torn away the kingship of Israel from you and has given it to another better than you.

11 In addition to the idea of submission, the Old Aramaic expression *'h̄z bkn̄p* (= Akkadian *sissikta šabātu*) carries the notion of 'making an alliance', wherein the subject of the phrase is invariably inferior to the suzerain with whom the alliance is made. Note the use of *sissiktam rakāsu* in *ARM* 2, 71 rev. 13-15: *u sissikti itti awīl Bābili aḥi irkus* "He made an alliance with the man of Babylon, my brother." Note the employing of the phrase *awīl Bābili* in this inscription and the similar expression *'yš yḥwdy* in Zech. 8:23, cited above in n. 10.