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THE PUNISHMENT OF THE MEN OF BETHSHEMESH

THE statement in 1 Sam. vi. 19 that more than fifty thousand of the men of Bethshemesh were slain by the Lord in punishment of an act of sacrilege committed when the ark returned from the land of the Philistines is so remarkable and sounds so appalling that it has been much discussed by commentators. Defenders of the Bible have had difficulty in justifying it; and critics have pointed to it as an example of a statement that is "incredible in itself".¹ Such being the case, it is important to observe that the principal difficulty in interpreting this verse is due to the fact that interpreters have as a rule followed the Septuagint (LXX) version, at least in part, instead of adhering strictly to the reading of the Massoretic Hebrew text.

The chief differences between the LXX version and the Hebrew text are two in number: the LXX contains a reference to "the sons of Jechonias",² and it connects the words "fifty thousand men" to the words "seventy men" by means of the conjunction "and". The first of these variations is of minor importance. We know nothing from the Scriptures about the sons of Jechonias. How this allusion to them came to stand in the LXX is a mystery: it may pique our curiosity, but we have no means of solving it.³ The fact that some modern critics have been willing to accept it shows how far they are disposed to allow their preference for the LXX to carry them in the discrediting of the Hebrew text.⁴ The second variation is of prime importance for the interpretation of the passage. By reading "and he smote of them seventy men and fifty

¹ So Driver in his *Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Books of Samuel*, p. 46.

² The reading of Codex B (see Swete) is: "And the sons of Jechonias among the men of Bethshemesh were not gratified when they saw the ark of the Lord." This reading is given in the text of the LXX column in Walton's Polyglot. We may assume that it was known to Poole, although he makes no mention of it.

³ The two letters of the word "he smote" are in Hebrew the same as the first two letters of the name Jechonias. This may offer a slight clue to this curious reading, but is very far from accounting for it.

⁴ This reading is regarded as preferable to that of the MT in Kittel's *Biblia Hebraica*. We find it in Moffatt's *Translation*, and also in the so-called "American" *Translation*. That it does not help the interpretation in any way is obvious.

thousand men" the LXX gives us this appallingly large total of the slain which, to say the least, it is so difficult to regard as correct. It involves the insertion of an "and" between these two numbers, the absence of which in the Hebrew is the most remarkable feature of that text, if, as the LXX would indicate, the two numbers are to be joined together. Yet this tendency to add the fifty thousand to the seventy shows itself in many versions, both ancient and modern. We find it, for example, in the Targum and in the Vulgate, in Luther's version, in the English Authorised Version and in the American Revised. The Syriac Peshitta and the Arabic (of Saadia?) likewise connect the two figures to form one total; but they reduce the second from fifty thousand to five thousand.

That the difficulties connected with the interpretation of this passage are not new but have long been recognised is indicated very clearly by the lengthy discussion of it which is to be found in Matthew Poole's *Synopsis* (London, 1669-74). Many a Bible student of to-day who has received the impression that the scholars of a few centuries ago were credulous and un-scholarly and that real "scholarship" is not to be expected before the rise of the Higher Criticism would be surprised to find how many of the difficulties raised by modern critics were known to, discussed and solved by, scholars whose names are almost forgotten to-day. Consequently, since Poole has discussed this passage so fully, we may well make his treatment of it the basis of our own.

I. THE RENDERING OF THE SEPTUAGINT

Since the popularity of the LXX rendering, "and he smote of them seventy men and fifty thousand men" is clearly indicated by the fact that it is followed in the Authorised (1611) Version, it is only natural that Poole should begin with it. This rendering is open, he tells us, to the following objections:

(1) There is no "and" connecting these words in the Hebrew.

(2) The order of the numbers is inverted; if the two form a total, the larger should precede.

(3) The repetition of the word "men" would be superfluous.

(4) So grievous a punishment is not in harmony with the character of God, who is gracious and long-suffering.

(5) The population of Bethshemesh could not have been as large as this total would indicate.

Beginning with the last of these objections, Poole points out that the great fertility and fruitfulness of the land of Canaan might account for the great size of the population of Bethshemesh. As to the objection that a merciful God could not have dealt so severely with the men of Bethshemesh, Poole points out that God is just as well as merciful; and he instances the Flood and the destruction of Sodom as signal examples of the severity of His judgments. Yet Poole was not satisfied with this argument, for he reminds us that the men of Bethshemesh "rejoiced" when they saw the ark and "offered burnt offerings and sacrificed sacrifices the same day unto the Lord", a fact which makes the severity of the punishment all the more remarkable. To this it may be added that the expression, "looked into (at, on)" the ark, is ambiguous and may be used in both a good and a bad sense, so that it is only through the severity of the punishment that the heinousness of the offence is made clear. As regards the second and third of the difficulties which he has listed, Poole mentions the explanation given in the Targum and followed in the Vulgate that the seventy men were "elders", while the fifty thousand were of the "congregation", i.e., were just ordinary folk. Such an explanation is opposed by the fact that the same word for "men" is used after both of the numbers;¹ and while it is unusual for the smaller number in a total to be placed first² this is not a sufficient reason for making this sharp distinction between the relative status of the two groups.

We should now expect Poole, having dealt with all the other objections to the LXX rendering, to discuss the one which

¹ In the case of the genealogies given in Gen. v and xi we very frequently find the word "year" used twice where the total is made up of hundreds and smaller numbers (e.g. "And Seth lived five years and a hundred years and begat Enosh"), and even where it is composed of tens and digits (Gen. v. 15: "And Mahalalel lived five years and sixty years and begat Jared").

² Aside from the genealogies in Gen. v and xi the inverted order is rare in the Old Testament. We find it in Num. iii. 50, 1 Kings. v. 12, Neh. vii. 70, Ezek. xlviii. 16, 17, 30, 32, 33, 34. Num. iii. 43 is especially interesting: the total 22,273 is given as "two and twenty thousand, three and seventy and two hundred".

he has mentioned first, the absence of the "and" in the Hebrew text. But he does not do so. This might be understood to mean either that he regarded the difficulty as negligible or as insuperable. We shall see presently that he cannot have regarded it as insuperable, since the view which he finally accepts resembles the LXX rendering in requiring the "and". But such cavalier treatment of a difficulty which Poole has placed first in his list is remarkable to say the least. For to anyone at all familiar with the syntax of the numerals in Hebrew, the absence of the "and" is the most remarkable feature in this passage and the only objection which can be raised from the standpoint of grammar to the correctness of the LXX rendering. If the "seventy men" and the "fifty thousand men" are the two members of a single total, the omission of the conjunction is most difficult to account for. It is practically without parallel in Biblical Hebrew.¹ Were it the result of a simple scribal error, such a crass blunder would almost certainly have been discovered and corrected before it could have come to be regarded as the authoritative reading. Yet the Massorettes have not even given us an alternative reading (*Qeri*) inserting the "and". Consequently, the fact that there is no "and" in the Hebrew is the greatest objection to the commonly accepted rendering of the LXX. Poole seems to have recognised this for he proceeds to express a strong preference for an interpretation which does not require the "and", and then, with strange inconsistency, finally decides in favour of one which does require it.

II. THE RENDERING OF THE PESHITTA

This rendering agrees as we have seen with the LXX in joining the two numbers together by "and" to form a single total, but differs from it in this respect that it makes the second number "five thousand" instead of "fifty thousand". Yet this is the solution which Poole finally accepts. And this apparently accounts for his failure to attach any great importance to the absence of the "and" in the Hebrew, since this objection weighs quite as strongly against the one rendering as against

¹ It not seldom happens, of course, that where a total is made up of thousands, hundreds, tens and digits the "and" is used only before the last. But the complete omission of the conjunction is extremely rare. An example is Neh. vii. 42, but in the parallel passage, Ezra ii. 39, the "and" is present, an indication perhaps that its omission in the Nehemiah passage is a scribal error.

the other. Arguing in favour of the Peshitta rendering Poole tells us that the whole structure of Biblical infallibility would not be undermined or shattered (*labefactari*) by the admission that the number "fifty" represents a scribal error which has occurred in the transmission of the Biblical text. This is of course to be admitted. But the reason which Poole alleges for holding that such an error is to be recognised in this instance and that the reading of the Peshitta is to be preferred to that of the Hebrew is a decidedly weak one. He tells us that this is the only variation between the Syriac and the Hebrew. But such is not the case. The Syriac twice inserts the word "Lord" as subject of the verb "smote". Instead of "looked in (on, into) the ark" it has "were afraid of the ark". Finally, the Syriac has recast the syntax of the numerals. The Hebrew has "seventy man fifty thousand man". The Peshitta reads "five thousands and seventy men". This involves much more than the change of the word fifty to five or vice versa. This is especially important because it helps us to account for the reading of the Syriac. In Syriac the difference between 5,000 and 50,000 is simply the difference between the plural noun "fifty" (חמשין) and the singular of the same noun "five" (חמשה), since both of these numbers are followed by the plural of the word "thousand". In the Hebrew, on the contrary, 50,000 requires the singular of the word "thousand" while 5,000 requires the plural. Consequently, Poole was mistaken when he declared that the only difference in the two figures is that between the singular and plural of the word "five". This is true of the Syriac, but not of the Hebrew. In the Hebrew a change in both words is involved if we read "five thousands" instead of "fifty thousand". So we must conclude that Poole made only a superficial study of the Syriac, since he failed to recognise that the change from 50,000 to 5,000 would be far more likely to occur in the transmission of the Peshitta, than the change from 5,000 to 50,000 to occur in the transmission of the Hebrew.¹ Of course if we are dealing with the question of an intentional change the alteration could have been made quite as easily in the one as in the other. But the evidence in support of the reading "fifty

¹ This is not the only case where the figures given in the Peshitta are lower than those in the MT. In 1 Sam. xiii. 5 the Syriac reads 3,000 instead of 30,000, in 2 Sam. x. 18 it has 4,000 instead of 40,000. In the one case the Greek of Lucian supports the Syriac, in the other the Arabic.

thousand" is far stronger than that which supports the reading "five thousand". If the familiar rule of the textual critic that the more difficult reading is likely to be the true one has any applicability to this passage, it argues in favour of the correctness of the Hebrew text.

III. THE RENDERING OF THE HEBREW TEXT

The most remarkable difference between the Hebrew text and the renderings of the versions which have just been considered is, as we have seen, the fact that the words "seventy men" and "fifty thousand men" are not joined by the conjunction "and". The only natural inference from this fact is that the two numbers are not to be joined together to form one total; in other words, that "only seventy men were smitten". Despite the fact that he finally decides in favour of the Peshitta rendering, Poole says of this interpretation: "This seems to me exceedingly probable." And he proceeds to discuss three renderings or interpretations which assume this to be the case. They are the following:

(1) "And he smote of the people seventy men (who had the value of) fifty thousand men."

(2) "And he smote of the people seventy men (out of) fifty thousand men."

(3) "And he smote of the people seventy men, fifty (out of) a thousand men."

While all proceed upon the common assumption that only seventy men were smitten, these interpretations differ radically among themselves. The first is not worthy of serious consideration. It is clearly based on the Targum and carries the Rabbinical idea of the dignity and importance of the "elders" to a ridiculous extreme.¹ The second rendering would require either that the words "fifty thousand men" be regarded as constituting an adverbial accusative, or that a preposition be

¹ Poole refers to 2 Sam. xviii. 3 as supporting such an interpretation. We might also compare 1 Chron. xii. 14: "These [eleven] were among the sons of Gad, captains of the host: one was for a hundred—the little (least); and the great one (greatest) for a thousand." That is, the least of these mighty men of Gad was the equal of a hundred ordinary men, the greatest was worth a thousand.

inserted or restored to connect these words with what precedes.¹ This would meet the difficulty raised by Poole against the LXX rendering that God could not have punished the men of Bethshemesh so severely as to slay more than 50,000 of them. But it does not meet the difficulty that Bethshemesh could not have had a population of more than 50,000 adult males. Both of these difficulties are met by the third of the renderings, which must therefore be regarded as the most attractive of the three. And as these difficulties are the ones which appeal most strongly to us to-day, just as they did to Poole, it is worthy of very careful consideration. Poole, despite the fact that he finally decided against it, said of this rendering: "The disadvantages of the commonly received version [that based on the LXX] support this conjecture most strongly." In support of it he points out that there are passages in the Old Testament where the force of the preposition "from" is plainly felt despite the fact that it does not appear in the Massoretic Text, or where it should be restored in that text.²

IV. "AND HE SMOTE SEVENTY MEN, FIFTY (FROM) A THOUSAND MEN"

This very attractive rendering of the Hebrew text must now be tested along three lines: grammatical, textual, and exegetical.

1. *The Grammatical Problem.*

As far as grammar and syntax are concerned, "and he smote seventy men, fifty a thousand men", is to be regarded as a perfectly possible rendering of the Hebrew of this passage.

¹ The explanation given by Poole that the words "fifty thousand men" could be a genitive after the word "people", despite the intervening words "seventy men" (*percussit de populo quinquaginta millium virorum, seu, in quo erant viri quinquaginta millia, viros septuaginta*) involves an impossible construction in Hebrew. Ps. xcvi. 7, cxix. 8, cxxxix. 14, to which he appeals, do not support it in the least.

² The examples which Poole cites are of quite varying value. Ex. xxxvi. 8 proves nothing, since the preposition "from" is never used with the word "linen" (*byssus*). In 2 Sam. xxiii. 24 "*from* Bethlehem" may be the correct reading (cf. 1 Chron. xi. 26). In 2 Kings xvii. 24 "and *from* Sepharvaim" is supported by the Qeri, but since the preposition has just occurred before four nouns in this series of five, it might perhaps have been omitted here as superfluous. In Josh vii. 13 "*from* before his enemies" is quite unnecessary. Ex. xix. 12 "take heed *from* going up" is much more probable (see below).

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The words "fifty a thousand men" constitute an explanatory apposition to "seventy men". "A thousand men" is an adverbial accusative of specification. "A thousand" is a proper rendering of the word *elep* which practically never occurs with the numeral "one" except in larger combinations, *elep* regularly meaning "one thousand" when standing by itself.¹ Both in the case of the figure "fifty thousand" and "a [i.e., one] thousand" the thing numbered, which is "man", follows regularly in the singular as here. Consequently the expression is ambiguous; and "fifty thousand men" or "fifty a thousand men" are equally possible renderings. That the former is the more natural is of course to be admitted. But this fact must be weighed against the other fact that in the context this natural rendering is very unnatural and may even be regarded as highly improbable if not really impossible. Consequently, it may be said in defence of the unnatural rendering that in the context it is the only natural rendering and that the writer may have used this ambiguous expression because to him and supposedly to his readers the expression could have only one meaning: viz., that only seventy men were slain and that this was on a basis of fifty per thousand. The principle that the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences is to be determined by the context, both immediate and more remote, is of universal application. It not seldom happens that the real clue to the meaning of an expression, both the apparently clear and the obscure, is supplied by the context and by the context alone.

2. *The Textual Problem.*

While the rendering "fifty a thousand men" is grammatically possible and may be regarded as quite intelligible in the light of the context, the fact that it makes the expression ambiguous and somewhat obscure must be regarded as an obstacle in the way of its acceptance. Language is intended to convey thought, not to conceal it. Lucidity of expression is an important characteristic of good writing. Consequently, while "fifty a thousand" is intelligible, it is to be noted that the clear and unambiguous way of expressing this idea would be either "fifty of (ל) a thousand" or "fifty from (מ) a

¹ In Isa. xxx. 17 the "one" is clearly added for the sake of emphasis: "one thousand at the rebuke of one, (or) at the rebuke of five, they will flee." But such an expression is unusual and exceptional.

thousand".¹ "Fifty from a thousand" would be perfectly clear and unambiguous. This would involve the assumption that the consonant *Mem* has been lost before the word *eleph* and should be restored. In favour of such an assumption it is to be noted that the word "fifty" which immediately precedes ends with *Mem*. This fact is of great importance because it is a well established principle of textual criticism that the writing of a letter once (monography) where it should be written twice is most likely to occur in cases where a word begins with the same letter as the one with which the immediately preceding word ends.² In the copying of Hebrew manuscripts, especially when this was done by dictation, such an error would be likely to be made because in Hebrew orthography the regular rule is that a consonant which is to be doubled is only written once. This rule applies, strictly speaking, only within the body of a single word. Whether it was ever given a wider application, it would be difficult to say.³ But that it could be a fruitful source of transcriptional errors would seem to be obvious. If such a scribal error is to be recognised here, the ambiguity of the expression disappears and one of the main objections to this rendering would be obviated.

3. *The Exegetical Problem.*

As Poole pointed out, it is in the light of the difficulties which confront the usual rendering of this passage that the one which we have been considering commends itself to us as

¹ For the use of ל see Num. xxxi. 5, Josh. xxii. 14, Judges xx. 10. For מ (i.e. ממ) see Eccles. vii. 28.

² Passages where such an error may have occurred in the case of *Mem* are: Ex. xix. 12 "take heed to yourselves *from* going up" (mentioned by Poole); Job xxxiii. 17 "to withdraw a man *from* his purpose"; Job. xxxvii. 7 "that all men may know his work".

³ Dr. R. D. Wilson (*Studies in the Book of Daniel* [1917], pp. 30f.) has pointed out that specimens of such "monographic" writing are to be found on the Aramaic docketts of Babylonian tablets in the spelling of proper names. But proper names may be regarded as constituting single words even though they may be formed of a combination of words. It is natural to suppose that in cases where a consonant was regularly slurred over in pronunciation it might also disappear from the orthography. This may be the explanation of the anomalous form of the *Piel* participle of the verb "refuse" (מנן). It occurs four times (Exod. vii. 27, ix. 2, x. 4, Jer. xxxviii. 21) without the preformative *Mem*. It is to be noted that in every one of these instances it follows the word "if" (אם). There are three possible explanations. The *Mem* of the preformative may have been lost through a scribal error. The word may have been spelled as pronounced; the doubled *Mem* at the beginning was not written twice because not pronounced. The *Mem* of the word "if" is to be regarded as doubled, being run together in pronunciation with the following participle.

worthy of careful attention. It avoids all the difficulties connected with the notion that more than fifty thousand men were slain. It also helps us to understand Josephus's account of this tragic event, his failure to mention the "fifty thousand men". If he believed that "seventy men and fifty thousand men" were smitten, it would be incredible that he should have mentioned the seventy and made no mention of the fifty thousand. But if, following the Hebrew text, he recognised that only seventy were smitten, he might in the brief account which he gives of this event have ignored the explanatory comment to the effect that the punishment was on a basis of fifty per thousand. That may have seemed to him a detail which he could safely ignore. The objection that this interpretation is out of harmony with the words of verse 19, "and the people mourned, because the Lord had smitten the people with a great slaughter", can hardly be regarded as serious. When we consider the number of households which the seventy men who were smitten may have represented, and how suddenly and unexpectedly the joy of the people had been turned to mourning, we can readily understand that there was "great lamentation". There may have been few "households" in Bethshemesh in which there was not one dead. Seventy would be a small proportion of more than fifty thousand. But seventy out of fourteen hundred would be something quite different. It may seem a little singular that the writer should tell us that the seventy represented a proportion of fifty in a thousand, instead of simply stating that they were out of a total of fourteen hundred. But the proportion of those smitten to the total of those involved in the trespass may have been the thing which interested him and which seemed to him especially important. If such was the case it would account for his commenting on the event in this rather singular way.

Whether this solution of a difficult problem commends itself to them or not, it should be recognised by critics of the Bible, in all fairness, that they have no right to describe the statement regarding the severity of the punishment of the men of Bethshemesh as one which from the standpoint of ethics and archaeology is "incredible in itself", when the interpretation to which such a characterisation is applicable is one which is definitely barred by the very phraseology of the Hebrew text of the passage itself.

Wayne, Penna.

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