

SUGGESTED NEW TRANSLATIONS OF
OLD TESTAMENT POETRY

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Evangelical scholarship has much to gain for a better understanding of the Bible text through the first hand study of original documents. Without such continued study we become the victims of interpretations made by those who can handle these original sources. It is also most reasonable that those who hold to verbal inerrancy should have a large motivation to do exegetical and textual critical studies. These disciplines must have an increasingly prominent place if we are to maintain our integrity regarding the verbal authority of the original text of scripture. Far from being a nitpicking exercise in variant spellings and inconclusive possibilities, we see come to light every year new material for understanding difficult passages and for putting easier passages into sharper focus. Last year when asked for specific illustrations of how such passages have been illuminated, I reviewed M. Dahood's use of Ugaritic in Anchor Bible 16 where he demonstrated, to the consternation of many, that the Psalms are full of references to immortality and resurrection.

At this time I would like to present further illumination of poetic passages from the Psalms, Job and the Prophets. I acknowledge my indebtedness to Dahood but shall not limit myself nor follow his renderings slavishly.

Most of the lexicographical illumination is based on Ugaritic simply because it is the largest corpus of documents from the North West semitic sphere. However not only by lexicography but by a wider understanding of phonetics, grammar, syntax and the principle of poetic structure we can learn to translate passages with greater accuracy. Due to the limitations of time this paper will deal with lexicographical examples, centering around epithets for God, and including a bit of phonetics and grammar.

The second half of Ps 22 (vss 23-31) usually receives little attention. Hebrews 2:12 quotes the opening words of this section to show that the Lord was not ashamed to call those whom he had sanctified brothers. "Saying, I will declare your name (O God) unto my brothers, I will sing praise to you in the midst of the church." On this authority Christians have considered these the words of the Resurrected Saviour though few have seen here the message of resurrection itself. This message is clearer than most have imagined but can be appreciated only with the help of Ugaritic lexicography.

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The voice of the great Elder Brother continues. We render Ps 22:26-32: (Specific items are discussed below following the footnote system.)

- 26 (25) "I (give) thee my praise a hundred times¹ in the great congregation My vows I pay before those who fear (worship) him.
- 27 (26) Let the afflicted eat and be satisfied,
Let those who seek the LORD praise him,
Let their² hearts live forever.
- 28 (27) For all the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, Yea all the families of the nations shall worship before thee,
- 29 (28) Because verily³ the LORD is the Ruler⁴
A Suzerain among the nations.
- 30 (29) Surely to Him⁵ all those who sleep in the earth⁶ shall bow down, And before Him shall crouch all who have descended to the dust. And the Victor himself shall give life.⁷
- 31 (30) A posterity (who) shall serve Him
Will tell about the Lord
To a generation that shall come.
- 32 (31) They will declare his righteousness
To a people yet to be born
That He has acted.

Everything in this proposed translation may not stand the test but let us examine some of its features.

(1) The use of a denominative verb from the word *me)ah* "a hundred". The verb meaning "to do or say a hundred times." Though this word is not used elsewhere in OT denominatively other number are so used. In Ezk 39:2 *ses* (six) seems to be used with same pronoun object. Furthermore in Ugaritic, Aramaic and Assyrian the number "two" is consistently used meaning "to say a second time, to repeat."

- (2) Let those who seek the Lord praise him,
Let *their* hearts live forever."

Following LXX and internal evidence we choose "their hearts" for "your hearts." *Hey* for *kaph* which in paleo-Hebrew script would look somewhat alike.

(3) "Verily" stands for emphatic *lamed* attested in Ugaritic and many other OT passages.

(4) *hammelúkâh* does not mean "kingdom" (*malkût* or *mamlakût*) but either "royal office" or a title "The Royal One" or "Ruler" having the feminine ending of such titles as *haqqohelet* "the preacher."

(5) The RSV saw that *)akelû* does not mean "they shall eat." Though "The fat ones of the earth shall eat and worship" may sound convincing to those who like to make jokes about preachers who like to eat, here it destroys the parallelism. It is rather *)ak + lô* "Surely to him shall bow down." Ugaritic has taught us that the conjunction *waw* like *gar* in Greek need not begin a clause.

(6) As for *disnéy)eres* meaning "the fat ones of the earth," *desen* (fatness) is simply not used in this way in the Bible.

While RSV starts out as an improvement over AV it also misses the force of the synonymous parallelism by translating these words "All the proud of the earth" which is obviously parallel to "All those descending to the dust." In *disney)eres* the *d* might be a relative pronoun as in Pgaritic and Aramaic and *seney* might be a syncopated form (Ps 23:6 *wesabti* of *yasen* (sleep) as in Dan 12.2 *miyeseney)admat (apar* "from those who sleep in the dust of earth." So here "All who sleep in the earth" parallels "All who descend to the dust."

(7) This third line of the tristich has been badly obscured in the translations.

RSV "And he who cannot keep himself alive"

AV "And none can keep alive his own soul."

The MT reads *wenapso lo) hiyyah. napso, napseka* commonly mean "himself," thyself etc. If we take the *lo)* to be the negative "not" we can conceivably arrive at the innocuous truism "that he who descends to the dust cannot keep himself alive." But what has that to do with his worshipping the Lord? However, when we see here the divine epithet *le)* as it appears in Ugaritic in the honorific name of Beal as *aliyn. b(l* (Victorious Baal) from the root *ly* "to prevail"—then this passage springs to life.

"Those who sleep in the earth . . .

Those who descend to the dust . . .

Do worship before him

For the Victor himself gives life."

And this becomes the key to numerous other passages such as I Sam 2:3 where the MT reads:

kty)el de (ôt yhw / welo) nitkenû (alilôt

The English versions follow the Qere changing *l)* to *lw* reading "For the Lord is a God of knowledge and by him actions are weighed.

The LXX vorlage read *we)el token (kai theos hetoimazon)* "and a God who weighs." Neither reversal of the consonants *l* to *)l* nor the Qere which deletes the *aleph* is necessary because the very same adjectival form of the divine epithet is attested in Ugaritic text 127:13-14.

mt dm ht / s(tqt dm lan

Mot (death) is stilled / Sha(taqat is Victor
So we should read Hannah's prototype of the Magnificat in I Sam 2:3:

"The Lord is a God of knowledge

Yea, the Victor is a weigher of actions" (*wele)on token alilot*)

The very same form is found in Hab 1:12 where *lo) namut* "we shall not die" is an intrusion into a series of epithets. This should read *le)on mawet* which makes the verse read smoothly

"Are you not from everlasting O LORD? O my God,
My Holy One, Victor over death."

Another place where *l* is changed to *lw* in order for the text to make sense is Job 13:15 *hen yiqteleni lo))ayahel*
)ak derakay)el panayw)okiyah

AV "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.
But I will maintain mine own ways before him."

The RSV refuses to follow the Qere:
"Behold, he will slay me, I have no hope;
Yet I will defend my ways to his face."

"This utterance has been hailed as the quintessence of the Hebrew tessence of the Hebrew spirit of faith as contrasted with the sullen acquiescence of the pagan phiolosophers . . . but there is no real basis for it in these words of Job. This interpretation derives from an ingenious emendation by the Masoretes who suggested that the reading should ious emendation by the Masoretes who suggested that the reading be *lō* spelled with the vocalic consonant *waw*, rather than *)alep* which stands in the text."

By taking *l* as *le*) "Victr" we translate with Dahood.
"Though the Victor slay me, I will still hope
Indeed I will (then) defend my ways to his face"

Here Job's words do not express hopelessness and they fit the immediate context in chapter fourteen and the larger context of the book where he speaks sometimes in despair but never gives up hope in God, in his own vindication and in life beyond the grave.

Another great expression of confidence in the Lord and in hope beyond the grave is in Ps 27:13. The verse begins with the word *hule*) "unless" which hangs unattached syntatically. Feeling this difficulty a few MSS omit it. The RSV taking the easy way out also omits it. The AV simply adds the clause "I had fainted," in italics, followed by "unless I had believed." . . .

Dahood takes the consonants just as they are *l + l*), preposition + the divine epithet. The preposition *l* going with the verb *)aman* as usual and we arrive at the translation:

In the Victor do I trust
to behold the beauty of the Lord
in the land of life (eternal).

As we have seen in some cases where *l*) is used the LXX sensed the need for something like *)el* and assuming the consonants were switched translated *theos* which made good sense. But in Mal 2:15 *Biblia Hebraica* 3 felt the need for such an emendation and suggests making *lo) ehad* read *)el)ehad*. This fits the context well where Malachi says earlier in verse 10 "Has not one God *)el)ehad* created us." So it is suggested this verse read "And one God made and sustains life (*ruah*) for himself." But it is unnecessary to switch the consonants, especially since all the external evidence including LXX witnesses to *l*), if we understand *le*) is an epithet for God. Thus Mal 2:15 reads "The One Victor has made and sustains life for himself."

In some Psalms, titles for God seem to have been confused with very common words which threw the translators off. As in Ps. 7:11(Heb)

magini (al)elohim
mosia(yisrey leb

AV (7:10) "My defence is of God, which saveth the upright in the heart."

RSV My shield is with God, etc. . .

In neither of these translations does the first clause correspond realistically to the Hebrew where (*al* can hardly mean "with" or "of".

Evidence from both Ugaritic (UT 126 III S-8) and the Samarian Ostraca witness to (*al* as a shortened form of (*eli* or (*alyon*. The latter appears in verse 9 of this Psalm

"Judge me O Lord, according to my righteousness
according to my integrity, O most High".

Again Hannah's song in I Sam 2:10 affords a striking example of this title. I Sam 2:10

"The adversaries of the LORD will be broken in pieces
The Almighty shall thunder from the heavens
[*alaw bismayim yar(em)*

The LORD will judge the ends of the earth".

Coming back to Psalm 7, another title for God is used here which clarifies this and a number of other contexts. I refer to the term *magen* (shield). This common meaning has hidden the Canaanite word *magan* "The LORD is a Sun and a Sovereign" (ont shield). which means Suzerain or Sovereign. So in the familiar Ps 84:12 (11)

Ps 47:9 takes on sparkling clarity when understood in this light. Both AV and RSV say "The shields of the earth belong to God". But the context beginning verse 7 says

7. "For God is the King of all the earth. . . .

8. "God reigneth over the nations. . . .

Thus the end of verse 9 should read:

"For verily (emphatic *lamed*) God is the Suzerain of the earth,
He is to be greatly exalted".

Returning again to Psalm 7:11 (10)

"My Sovereign is the Almighty God (*magani (el) eohim*)
Who saves the upright in heart".

Moving from divine epithets to another area where a commonly used word obscures a rarer root we go to the Tell-el-Amarna tablets for evidence. In at least a half dozen places the word *dibber* (speak) should be derived from the root *duppuru* meaning "to banish, drive away". In Arabic and sometimes in Ugaritic the difference between *p* and *b* is not phonemic (cf. Ugaritic *lps* - Hebrew *lbs*).

Jerm 9:20, 21 (21, 22) can now be translated:

"For death has come up into our windows
It has entered our palaces,
Cutting off the children from the street,
And the young men from the squares it *drives away*."

The other places are Ps 2:5, Ps 56:6; Prov 21:28; Lam 5:9 and Ps 127:4, 5 (5, 6). The latter passage reads:

"Like arrows in the hands of a warrior
So are the sons of one's youth
Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them.
They shall not be shamed
Because they shall *drive away* the enemy from the gate".

Understanding simple phonetic shifts brings meaning into hitherto unexplained words. For example a regular shift between Hebrew and Aramaic is between *z* and *d*. This shift takes place sporadically between Hebrew and Ugaritic. This is enough to instruct us that with the Canaanite or Aramaic substratum present in some Hebrew poetry recognizing this shift will make certain words fit perfectly into context.

For example in Ps 49:11 Hebrew *hzh* Ugaritic *hdy* "to gaze"

kiy yir) eh hakamim yamátú
yahod kesil waba(ar [ba(ir) yo)bedu

If he looks on the wise they shall die

(I) he gazes¹ on the fool then straightway² they shall perish."
¹apocapated *yahadeh*;² *ba(ar* - "brutish" but *ba(ir* - "straightway".

Job 34:29 *we(al goy we(al) adam yahad*
"Upon nation and upon man he gazes".

Ps 21:7 *tehaddehu besimhah) et paneyka*
RSV "Thou dost make him glad (*hdh*) with the joy of thy presence." Much better is "You shall make him *see* thy face with joy."

Ps 33:15 *hayyoser yahod libbam*
hammebin) el kol ma(aseyhem
"The One who creates *sees* their heart
The One who perceives (sees) all their deeds".
yahod cannot mean "all" as in RSV nor "alike" as in AV.

Similarly *me)od* of Ps 46:2 should read *me)ad* which is Canaanite for *me)az* "from of old" (as Ugar. *id* (time) - Heb. *az*).

So Ps 46:2 (1)
)elohim lanu mahaseh wa(az
(ezrah besarot nimsa) me)od [me)ad]

"God is to us a refuge and strength
A help in trouble he has proven to be *from of old*."

Even better, Ps 139:14b
wenapsiy yoda (at me)od [me)ad]
AV "And *that* my soul knows right well"
RSV "Thou knowest me right well"

But better to render:

My soul (life) you knew *from of old* (in time past),
My substance (frame) was not hidden from you when I was made
in secret.

There have been charges of pan-Ugaritism and claims that Ugaritic is not Canaanite etc. but the consensus of scholarly opinion remains that it is some form of North West Semitic; and though the city itself was as cosmopolitan port-city with Hittite, Hurrian, Egyptian and Aegean influences still the poetry had its provenance in the West Semitic sphere and the poetic structure, style, grammar and vocabulary closely resemble the earliest poetry of Israel and even later Israelite poetry where it reflects a Northern dialect. Over fifty per cent of the Ugaritic material is now prose which Albright claims is in a dialect closer to Hebrew prose though it is difficult to say since so many texts are not very grammatical there being so many administrative and epistolary tablets. The claim is that the prose texts make a stronger distinction between *qtl* as a past tense and the *yqtl* as a future.

As for the hundreds of new possibilities which are accumulating to enable us to explain the consonantal text of poetic passages in the Psalter and Prophets we must be dedicated to sound linguistic principles and not accept new translations just because they are ingenious. On the

other hand where Biblia Hebraica 3 is crammed with emendations which are suggested as a solution for supposedly corrupt texts, as Dahood and others have demonstrated, often amazing clarity can be produced without the change of single consonant.

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