

Critical Note on Psalm cxix. 122.—It is hardly necessary to remind readers of THE EXPOSITOR that Psalm cxix. is constructed on a highly artificial plan. Its one hundred and seventy-six verses are divided into sections of eight verses, and each verse of each section begins with the same letter, the first taking א, and the rest the following letters of the alphabet in order. This device is carried through without any exception. Then the writer has selected ten words (רַךְ, עֲדָה, פִּקְדָה, חַק, מִצְוָה, אֲמוּנָה, דָּבָר, אֲמָרָה, מִשְׁפָּט, תּוֹרָה), indicating with various shades of meaning the law, which the psalm celebrates; and one of these words is found in every verse except ver. 122. The English version has misled many of the commentators as to this point; e.g. Perowne excepts also ver. 132 from the rule: "Look Thou upon me, and be merciful unto me, as Thou usest to do unto those that love Thy name"; but the Hebrew for "as Thou usest to do" is לְמִשְׁפָּט (Vulgate, *secundum iudicium*; LXX., κατὰ τὸ κρίμα). The *Speaker's Commentary* has the same error. Andrew Bonar excepts also ver. 84, which contains the same word מִשְׁפָּט. But ver. 122 seems to be a real exception; no one of the ten words occurs, nor any other word of similar meaning; nor, as far as I have been able to find, is there any various reading. Now when we find a writer of immense ingenuity and patience setting out to compose such a work as this; and when we find that he carries out his design with perfect accuracy in three hundred and fifty-one out of three hundred and fifty-two cases, are we not justified in saying that there *must* be some error of reading in the three hundred and fifty-second case? It seems *à priori* impossible that he should have allowed his design to be spoiled by one exception of this sort. And when we find that a trifling alteration in one word at once completes the perfection of the composition and improves the sense of the verse, we shall be strongly disposed to accept it as the probably correct reading.

The first clause of the verse reads at present, עֲרַב עִבְרֶךָ לְטוֹב, translated, "Be surety for Thy servant for good"; explained by the *Speaker's Commentary*, "Be my surety or defence for good; i.e. that it may be well with me": which is at any rate vague. Substitute לְתוֹרָה for לְטוֹב, and a much more precise meaning is obtained: "Be surety for Thy servant in regard to the law." The psalmist is oppressed and persecuted, and his fear is, that by reason of this oppression he may be led to break the command-

ments of the Lord (vers. 84, 86, 87, 110, 115, 116, 134, etc.). Therefore he prays God to become His surety, not simply that it will be well with him, which is not his first concern, but that he will keep the law. If God undertakes to pledge Himself that His servant shall not fall, he will then be secure, the Lord having become his righteousness.

But can the corruption of the original reading be accounted for? It is a very ancient one, for the LXX. read as our Hebrew Bibles do (ἔαδεξαι τὸν δοῦλόν σου εἰς ἀγαθόν). Assuming then that the original reading was לְתוֹרָהּ אֱלֹהִים, and remembering that in the older forms of the Hebrew alphabet א and ה were very similar, and ר and ב almost identical in form, we can easily see how (1) the ה might be dropped before the א which follows, and the more easily as תוֹרָה occurs twenty-five times in the psalm, and would therefore be written somewhat hastily and mechanically; and (2) the resultant לְתוֹרָהּ אֱלֹהִים be mistaken for לְתוֹבָאֵל, the sound of which would naturally suggest לְטוֹבָאֵל, the present reading, just as *good* would be at once changed to *good* if we met it in writing or print.

The final ה once dropped, the rest follows almost inevitably. Nothing is commoner than the dropping out of a letter when followed by the same letter; and that ה and א (the letter which follows) were so much alike as to be readily mistaken for one another may be inferred from such passages as Psalm cxxx. 4, where the received text has תוֹרָה; but there is a well-supported variant תוֹרָה. An instance of ה dropped before a following ה may be found in 1 Samuel i. 28, where the text has חִיהוּא, but four MSS. read חִיהוּא; or, more exactly like our חסו case, in Isaiah lx. 9 the text has בְּרֵאשֵׁנָה, but there is a variant כְּבֵרֵאשֵׁנָה, where כ has fallen out before ב, not the same, but a similar letter. The reading having thus become לְתוֹרָהּ אֱלֹהִים, which would make no sense, the scribe would almost automatically read the ר as ב, the ancient forms being almost identical, giving לְתוֹבָאֵל, which he would judge to be meant for לְטוֹבָאֵל, and write accordingly, טוֹב being an exceedingly familiar word.

Such an explanation being possible, it seems easier to believe that it is correct in this case, than to think that the writer of the psalm spoilt its perfection as an artificial composition by intentionally breaking his rule in this one verse.

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