

Problems in the Psalms

PROBLEM TEXTS (4)

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There are some passages in the Psalms which raise questions on the ground of text translation or interpretation. Let us look at a few of these.

(a) **'Kiss the Son'** (*Ps. 2:12, AV*). To the reader of the AV this text presents no problem. 'Kiss' means 'pay homage to' (as in *1 Kings 19:18; Job 31:27; Hos. 13:2*); 'the Son' is the one to whom God says in *Ps. 2:7*, 'Thou art my Son' (that is, according to the NT, the Messiah). The problem appears when we look at other translations. The earliest translators found difficulty with the meaning of the Hebrew. The Septuagint translators, before the time of Christ, rendered the words 'lay hold of instruction' (as though in anticipation of *Prov. 4:13*); Jerome rendered them 'worship in purity'. Why this difficulty? One reason for it is that the rendering 'kiss the Son' presupposes that in this Hebrew composition the Aramaic word for 'son' (*bar*) has been used here, although the regular Hebrew word is used in *verse 7*. Some modern versions, preferring to read Hebrew throughout instead of an unaccountable Aramaism, take the consonants of *bar* along with those of 'rejoice' (*q̄lw*) to form one word; so RSV 'with trembling kiss his feet' (similarly Jerusalem Bible). This would be my personal preference. NEB 'kiss the king' (lit. 'kiss the mighty one', Heb. *gibbôr*) involves a more complicated redistribution of the consonants. We may, if we prefer, follow NIV and continue to render 'kiss the Son'; an early precedent for this rendering is the Peshitta Syriac version, but to the Syriac translators the clause read as if it were altogether in Syriac or Aramaic, for not only is *bar* the Syriac or Aramaic for 'son', but the word 'kiss' is the same in Syriac or Aramaic as in Hebrew. But let us beware of ascribing unworthy motives (as some have done) to those who opt for a different reading or rendering. The messianic interpretation of the psalm is unaffected.

(b) **'thy gentleness hath made me great'** (*Ps. 18:35 = 2 Sam. 22:36, AV*). Here there is little doubt about the text, and there is no need at all to emend it. There has been some discussion about the meaning of the word rendered 'thy gentleness' (Heb. *'anawah*); some have derived it from other roots with the same form, and

translated it by 'your answering (me)' (D. W. Thomas) or 'your triumph' (M. Dahood). But most probably it means 'your gentleness'. Modifications of this sense are found in the Septuagint ('your training'), RSV ('thy help'), NEB ('thy providence'); NIV paraphrases 'you stoop down to make me great'. But in what sense did God's gentleness make David great? David is giving thanks to God for a recent victory in which he has destroyed his enemies; it is not implied that God's gentleness was imparted to David so as to be manifested by him in his dealings with his enemies. If we bear in mind that the Hebrew verb 'make great' also means 'bring up' (as in *Isa. 1:2*, 'I have ... brought up children'), we may appreciate the marginal rendering in the Jerusalem Bible: 'your gentle care fosters me' (or 'has fostered me'). That is to say, God's gentle care for David brought him up, delivered him from all his enemies, and has now given him this outstanding victory which has brought him to the pinnacle of greatness.

(c) **'They pierced my hands and my feet'** (*Ps. 22:16*). The reader of the AV who, guided by our Lord's use of the opening words of this psalm in his sense of dereliction on the cross, reads the remaining words as a detailed prophecy of his crucifixion, finds no problem in the closing words of *verse 16*. Our Lord's hands and feet were indeed pierced on the cross. But questions must arise when consideration is given to the rendering of this clause in other versions. Other versions differ widely because the Hebrew text itself is meaningless and must be emended. The Hebrew text, as we have received it, reads 'like a lion my hands and my feet'. Some students, reckoning that the comparison of the speaker's enemies to dogs at the beginning of the verse is being carried on, have supplied a verb like 'biting' or 'lacerating': 'biting like a lion my hands and my feet'. This is not very satisfactory: a dog does not bite like a lion. It is better to adopt, as many do, a very slight emendation of Heb. *ka'ari* ('like a lion') to a verbal form *ka'aru*, variously translated 'they have bound' (Jerome, G. R. Driver, Jerusalem Bible) or 'they have

dug through', 'they have pierced' (Septuagint, RSV, NIV).

There is little to be said for Moffatt's vague 'my hands and feet are all disfigured': there is still less to be said for the extraordinary NEB rendering: 'they have hacked off my hands and my feet'. Some years ago I addressed a Bible Society meeting in North Devon, and in the question-time that followed my talk one man very angrily raised the point of this mistranslation. I had not mentioned the NEB in my talk (spotting one or two individuals in the audience, I had judged discretion to be the better part of valour), and when this man raised the point, I agreed that 'they hacked off' was a mistranslation; but he would not be pacified. He seemed to hold me somehow responsible for the offence, and kept on saying, 'No sir: "a bone of him shall not be broken"'. This showed the ground of his anger: he took every clause of *Ps. 22* to be a prediction of Christ crucified and thought that the NEB was deliberately contradicting the testimony of scripture, that no bone of him was broken. If 'they have pierced' is the correct translation (as I take it to be), then *Ps. 22:16* presents a very remarkable coincidence with the passion narrative, if it is not an outright prediction of it. But *Ps. 22:16* is nowhere cited in the New Testament as a proof-text, and my questioner had not learned the important lesson that, because one or two sentences of a psalm are quoted of Christ in the New Testament, it does not follow that the whole psalm refers to him.

I have heard speakers tie themselves in knots trying to explain how *Ps. 69:5* could be an utterance of Christ. But, although *Ps. 69:9* is applied to him in *John 2:17* and *Rom. 15:3*, there is no need to ascribe *verse 5* to him also. Those verses apply which can be applied naturally, without forcing. If this had been more clearly appreciated in the early days of the Brethren movement, some of its leaders (like B. W. Newton and even J. N. Darby) would not have found themselves charged with heresy because their thorough-going christological exegesis of the Psalms led them to speak of Christ as enduring non-atoning sufferings at the hand of God.