

# “Having Loosed the Pangs of Death”

Robert G. Bratcher

The translation of the participial clause *lusas tas ôdinas tou thanatou* in Acts 2:24 poses an interesting problem, for here is a case where it may be said that the total meaning is not equal to the sum of the meanings of the component parts.

The word *ôdin* means ‘labor pain’, the pain of birth suffered by a woman in giving birth to her child. Elsewhere in the New Testament it occurs in Mk. 13:8 and Mt. 24:8 of the eschatological woes, wars, earthquakes, and famines, all of which are *archê ôdinôn* ‘the beginning of the labor pains’ of the new age soon to be born. In 1 Thes. 5:3 the suddenness with which the eschatological destruction will come is likened to the way in which the labor pangs suddenly come upon a woman with child.

In the Septuagint, likewise, the word signifies ‘labor pains’;<sup>1</sup> in three passages it is used in a more general sense of pain or anguish;<sup>2</sup> even in these, however, the allusion to the sudden and cruel seizure of labor pains is easy to detect.

In addition to these passages, the phrase *ôdines thanatou* appears three times in the LXX: 2 Sam. 22:6, Ps. 17(18):5, Ps. 114(116):3; and *ôdines hadou* once, Ps. 17(18):6. In light of the meaning of *ôdin* elsewhere in the LXX, it would seem that the phrase *ôdines thanatou* (or *hadou*) would be ‘the labor pains of death’ or, perhaps, in a more general sense, ‘the pains of death’. In these passages, however, the original Hebrew word is *ḥēbhēl* ‘bond’, ‘chain’, and not *ḥēbhēl* ‘pang’; the two words, being almost identical, were confused with each other (as happens also in Aramaic and Syriac). The phrase *ḥēbhlēy-maweth* means ‘the bonds of death’, in which death (or Sheol) is represented as lying in wait with cords and snares to trap its victim (cf. the similar *moqshēy-maweth* ‘snares of death’ in Ps. 18:5, Prov. 14:27, 21:6; cf. *pagis thanatou* ‘snare of death’ in Tobit 14:10).

It is clear that in the Hebrew Bible the phrase *ḥēbhlēy-maweth* meant ‘the cords of death’. What did *ôdines thanatou* mean in the LXX? The metaphor of ‘the birth pangs of death’ encompassing or entangling its victim is a very forced one, and seems quite unlikely. It is to be noticed that the poetic structure makes *ôdines hadou* parallel with ‘snares of death’ in Ps. 17:6; *ôdines thanatou* is parallel to ‘torrents of iniquity’ in Ps. 17:5, to ‘cruelties of death’ in 2 Sam. 22:6, and to ‘perils of Hades’ in Ps. 114:3. In all these figures there is present the idea of active peril and danger. It may reasonably be inferred, therefore, that the phrase *ôdines thanatou* in the LXX was meant to convey the meaning ‘the bonds of death’, in conformity with the meaning of the Hebrew phrase it was translating.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. 1 Sam. 4:19; 2 Kg. 19:3; Is. 37:3; Job 39:1, 2, 3; Ps. 47 (48):6; Is. 13:8, 21:3, 26:17, 66:7; Jer. 6:24, 13:21, 22:23, 27 (50):43; Hos. 13:13; Mic. 4:9; Na. 2:11(10); Si. 7:27; 4 Mac. 15:7, 16, 16:8.

<sup>2</sup> Ex. 15:14; Deut. 2:25; Job 21:17.

In like fashion it is suggested that the phrase *hai ôdines tou thanatou* in Acts 2:24 means 'the cords of death'. If it is maintained that 'labor pangs of death' is the meaning intended, it must be emphasized that the only meaning the whole participial clause can bear, in the context, is that 'God raised Jesus by bringing to an end the labor pangs of death'. By the use of this figure death is portrayed as a woman in labor whose birth pangs are brought to an end by giving birth to the Messiah, i.e. the resurrected Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

This is, however, a bizarre figure of speech, and translators have shied away from it. In the main, they have followed two courses: (1) some have translated the phrase to mean "having stopped death's pains": so the Authorized Version "having loosed the pains of death"; English Revised Version, American Standard Version, Montgomery, Revised Standard Version, "having loosed the pangs of death"; cf. also Moffatt, Goodspeed, Weymouth, and the Zürich translation; Douay and Confraternity (following Vulgate *doloribus inferni*). In all these translations the meaning presumably intended is "ending the pains death was inflicting on Jesus," and *not* "ending the pains death was suffering." Indeed, it may be asked what is meant by "loosing the pangs of death" in RSV and others; it would seem that the verb *loose* meaning 'set free' here signifies 'to end death's pangs by setting them free', an obscure expression, at best.

It should be stressed, however, that *hai ôdines* does not mean 'pain' or 'suffering' which one person inflicts on another; it means, rather (consonant with its usage in the New Testament and the LXX), the labor pains, the birth pangs which a woman suffers in the throes of childbearing. Furthermore, the verb *luô* in Luke-Acts means quite literally 'to loose', 'to untie',<sup>4</sup> and in an extended sense, 'to break up'.<sup>5</sup> Even if in Acts 2:24 *luô* means 'to bring to an end', in the clause in which it is used it means 'to bring to an end the pangs death was suffering'; to give the sense of "ending the pains death was inflicting on Jesus" is to evade the correct meaning of the phrase in order to provide an intelligible figure of speech in translation.

(2) Other translators, veering even further from the sense of the original, have translated the phrase to mean "freeing Jesus from the pains of death," meaning, clearly, "freeing Jesus from the pains which death was inflicting on him": so C. B. Williams, Knox, Phillips, the Synodale, and the Jerusalem Bible. This, however, is clearly a mistranslation, since it introduces "him" as the direct object of the participle (whereas 'the pangs of death' in Greek is the object) and making 'the pangs of death' the realm or condition from which Jesus was set free.

Both forms of translation, therefore, fail accurately to convey the meaning of the original. If, with all these translations, *hai ôdines tou thanatou* be taken to mean 'the pangs of death', it must be made clear

<sup>3</sup> Cf., among others, F. Field, *Notes on the Translation of the New Testament*, p. 112; Arndt and Gingrich, *Lexicon*, s.v. *luô*, 4, *thanatos*, 1.b.β.

<sup>4</sup> Of an animal, Lk. 13:15, 19:30, 31, 33; of a person, Acts 22:30; figuratively, Lk. 13:16; of sandals, Lk. 3:16; Acts 7:33, 13:25.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 13:43, 27:41.

that they are the pangs which death itself suffers, not the pains it inflicts on someone else; and the participial clause *lusas tas ôdinas tou thanatou* can mean only 'bringing to an end the labor pains of death', that is, bringing the labor to an end in the birth of the child. That this would be the meaning is clearly proven from the LXX of Job 39:2: *ôdinas de autôn elusas* 'did you bring to an end their labor pains?'

It would seem, therefore, that the proper meaning of the Greek phrase *hai ôdines tou thanatou* in Acts 2:24 is *hëbhlēy-maweth* 'the cords of death', and that the participial clause *lusas tas ôdinas tou thanatou* means 'unfastening the bonds of death'. God raised Jesus from the dead by untying the cords with which death held him fast. This is a natural figure of speech, conforming with figures used in the Old Testament, and would certainly convey meaning to Peter's listeners (whatever Peter may have said in Aramaic) and to the readers of the Acts (cf. also *Epistle of Polycarp*, I.2).

It should be more generally recognized, therefore, that *hai ôdines tou thanatou* means 'the bonds of death'. Liddell-Scott-Jones have already done so (*s.v.* *ôdis* II.3), and one can only wish that Arndt and Gingrich had followed Liddell and Scott in the matter. Of the translations which have adopted this meaning, Berkeley has "unfastening the cords of death," and the new Brazilian revision *rompendo os grilhões da morte*.

---

## Note on G'RH with Especial Reference to Proverbs 13:8

*Francis M. Seely*

Proverbs 13:8 in the ASV reads, "The ransom of a man's life is his riches: but the poor heareth no threatening (mg. Or rebuke)." AV reads "rebuke," and the ASV was right in seeking some more appropriate meaning for the word. The question is, is 'threatening' a legitimate translation of *G'RH*, and does it give a good sense to the verse? Apparently RSV did not think so, and so altered the Hebrew text.

Perhaps the trouble began with a statement by Toy,<sup>1</sup> "some take *rebuke* as = *threat* (a sense which the word nowhere else has)." This statement is echoed by Oesterley,<sup>2</sup> and again by Fritsch.<sup>3</sup> An examination of the passages in which *G'RH* occurs shows the opposite to be true. The use of 'threat' is supported by both the Gesenius-Buhl and the Koehler lexicons. It quite definitely means 'threat' in Isa. 30:17 and is so translated by ASV, RSV, and Bewer.<sup>4</sup> That a thousand should flee at a rebuke is hard to imagine, but to flee at a threat is

---

<sup>1</sup> *Proverbs*, International Critical Commentary, p. 265.

<sup>2</sup> *The Book of Proverbs*, Westminster Commentary, p. 100.

<sup>3</sup> *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 4, p. 856.

<sup>4</sup> *The Book of Isaiah*, Harper's Annotated Bible Series, p. 80.