

A TRANSLATOR'S NOTE ON PSALM 7:4b

In verses 3–5 of Psalm 7 the psalmist establishes his right to claim the Lord's protection by appealing to his own conduct. He lists three accusations made against him (3b, 4a, 4b), and then defends himself by invoking on himself, in three lines (5a, b, c), the dire consequences he is prepared to suffer if it is found that he is guilty of these wrongs.

The first and second of the three accusations are stated fairly straightforwardly, and commentators and translators are generally agreed on their meaning: "if I have wronged someone" (3b), and "if I have betrayed my friend" (4a). But the third one (4b) has been variously interpreted and translated.

(1) Some take it as an affirmation, "I have spared the man who for no reason was my enemy": such is the interpretation of the King James Version, the American Standard Version, and the New American Bible (see also Kirkpatrick's commentary, and the translation of the Psalms by Gelineau). Against this interpretation stands the construction of this half-line: it starts with "and", and it seems most likely that the "if" at the beginning of the verse also modifies this half-line. Such an interpretation, by introducing a statement of fact after two conditional statements, breaks the pattern and seems quite unjustified. Very few modern commentators defend this interpretation.

(2) Others translate, "If I have spared the man who for no reason was my enemy". At first sight this seems like a rather improbable accusation, against which the psalmist would have to defend himself in order to claim the Lord's protection, but the idea that enemies, especially those who have no reason for being enemies, deserve to be punished is not, to say the least, foreign to the Psalms. Oesterley and Briggs support this interpretation; Briggs regards this half-line as a gloss and makes the point that it is antithetical to the preceding half-line. The Jerusalem Bible has, "(if I) spared a man who wronged me", and comments in the footnote that this reflects the law of revenge which requires that good be repaid with good, and evil with evil (see Exod. 21:25, Lev. 24:19–20, Deut. 19:21). The NEB has, "or set free an enemy who attacked me without cause". But for some this interpretation seems "a monstrosity" (so Prof. Tigay, in the article cited below), and so they interpret the half-line in another way.

(3) Some commentators and translators interpret, "If I have oppressed my enemy without cause"; or, taking the word for "without cause" to modify not the verb but "my enemy": "If I have oppressed the man who without cause was my enemy". This interpretation is favored by Moffatt, the American Bible (Smith-Goodspeed), and the Revised Standard Version and such commentators as Delitzsch and Weiser. The question here is if the Hebrew verb, which in the first two lines of interpretation given is taken to mean "spare", can mean "oppress". The verb is *ḥalaṣ*, in the piel, and it is significant that the Koehler-Baumgartner Lexicon defines the meaning of the verb in this passage as "despoil", but in no other place where the same form

occurs. The meaning "pull out, tear out", used of stones in an infected house (Lev. 14:40, 43), is perfectly consonant with the meaning "pull out of danger", that is, "rescue, save", which is the meaning of the verb in the piel in all its other occurrences. One may refer to Psalms 6:4a, 18:19b (see the parallel 2 Sam. 22:20), 34:7b, 50:15b, 81:7a, 91:15c, 116:8a, 119:153a, 140:1a.

The verb *laḥaṣ* (in which the first two letters are the same as *ḥalaṣ*, but in reverse order), means "oppress, vex" and the Septuagint and the Syriac, as well as the Targum, have this meaning. But, as commentators point out, the Hebrew verb *ḥalaṣ* means "rescue, save, spare", and in none of its occurrences in the Hebrew Scriptures does it mean "oppress, plunder". The Syriac verb *ḥalaṣ* means "plunder", but it does not also have the meaning "rescue, save". So the translations, such as the RSV, which translate the saying this way are really translating an emendation, *laḥaṣ*, and should indicate the fact in a footnote (as Weiser does in his translation of the psalm).

(4) One other interpretation has been proposed, which also involves emending the text. Instead of "my enemy" the text is changed to read "his enemy" (a change in the suffix from *yodh* to *waw*), that is, the enemy of "my friend" in 4a. This was proposed by Kissane in his Commentary on the Psalms (1953), and has lately been advanced by Prof. Tigay of Yale University in an article in the June 1970 issue of *Journal of Biblical Literature* (pp. 178–186). The obvious objection to this is that it involves emendation. (It should be mentioned that Dahood, and others, hold that in biblical Hebrew the third person pronoun "his" could also be written with a *yodh*. If this is so, then the present Hebrew text can mean "his enemy" without being emended. But not many commentators defend this.)

If the Hebrew text, as it is, can yield satisfactory sense in the context without being emended, it should be translated. The last two interpretations discussed involve emendation, and the first one violates the structure of the strophe. It would appear, therefore, that the second interpretation is to be preferred: "If I have spared the man who for no reason did me wrong". Distasteful as this may be to us, it fits in quite well with the customs and mores of the time, which required that a man be punished in kind for his evil acts.