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“THE LORD OF HOSTS” OR “THE SOVEREIGN LORD OF ALL”?

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In the course of his work of translating the Scriptures, the translator will be faced with many “cruces interpretum”. One such problem is the translation of the Old Testament phrase “Yahweh sebaoth”. What was the original meaning of this formula? How should it be translated into modern languages? How does modern Old Testament theology view this problem?

There is no simple answer to these questions. Modern Old Testament theology offers no unanimous interpretation of this formula. Yet in spite of the differing opinions of various theologians, one can see a certain trend in modern Old Testament theology in recent years, and an analysis of the varying opinions of theologians can help one to form one’s own interpretation.

1. The meaning of the formula “Yahweh sebaoth” in the Old Testament

Let us first summarize some of the views of the theologians on this question. Since the Hebrew concept “sábá” means the “the army hosts”, the phrase “Yahweh sebaoth” literally means “Lord of the army hosts”. This leads to the idea of God as the Lord of armies, commander-in-chief, or as the God of war. This view is held by E. Meyer, W. Eichrodt, M. Bič, R. H. Pfeiffer, W. R. Arnold, W. F. Albright, J. Obermann and G. Östborn. Eichrodt maintains that the name “sebaoth” indicates first and foremost “God of war”.¹

This conception has some support in the Old Testament. Israel imagined God as a warrior whose armies were angels, stars, natural and cosmic powers. Psa. 24.8 expresses this: “The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle!” We can read in the Old Testament of the Lord’s battles, 1 Sam. 18.17; 25.28. There is no denying that Yahweh appears as the God of war. “The Lord will fight for you”, Ex. 14.14; Deut. 1.30; 3.22; Josh. 10.14; 23.3. Even the cosmic powers fight on the side of Israel, Josh. 10.11; Psa. 18.14.

But is this the main sense of the formula “Yahweh sebaoth”, or is it only a secondary or derived meaning? We maintain, in accordance with many Old

¹ W. Eichrodt: *Theologie des Alten Testaments* I, 120.

Testament theologians, that the idea of God as the God of war is secondary in the understanding of God in Israel. The primary idea of God in Israel is that God is Lord and King of the whole universe: 1 Sam. 12.12; Psa. 5.3; 10.16; 47.3; 74.12 etc. Every monarch has his armies. The people of Israel came to believe that heaven was organized like an army whose purpose was to fight on the side of Israel in earthly battles. Yet the hosts of Yahweh—angels, stars, natural and cosmic powers—were also instrumental in bringing God's whole purposes in this world to fruition. In the Old Testament God is therefore not primarily the God of war, but monarch, ruler, king and Lord. As such he also has his armies.

In his article "Jahweh sebaot in Samuel and Psalms"², J. P. Ross follows Eissfeldt in claiming that, for Israel, God is not primarily the God of war but the King. However, he goes too far in denying any secondary military connotation to the formula "Yahweh sebaot". It is thus significant that Ross has to explain 1 Sam. 4.8; 17.14 as glosses, and Psa. 24.7–10 as referring to chaos.

All this is of great importance for a right understanding of the meaning of "Yahweh sebaot". This term had come, in times of battle, to be related to earthly battles, as is seen in 1 Sam. 17.45 where David says to Goliath: "You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin; but I come to you in the name of Yahweh sebaot . . ." But, as von Rad points out, such occurrences of the formula "Yahweh sebaot" in connection with earthly armies are rather rare. On the other hand, this formula is used 247 times by the prophets with no connection at all with the wars of Israel³. According to the American theologian Robert Dentan, the phrase "Yahweh sebaot" is monotheistic and universalistic in its connotations.⁴ Walther Zimmerli points to Crüseman's opinion that "Yahweh sebaot" is very often closely related to God's creative power (Amos 4.13; 5.8; 9.6).⁵ Many illustrations from the Old Testament could be cited to show that "Yahweh sebaot" expresses God's sovereign power over the earth, e.g. Isa. 37.16: "Yahweh sebaot, God of Israel, who art enthroned above the cherubim, thou art the God, thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; thou hast made heaven and earth" (cf. also Jer. 27.4; Amos 4.13; Zech. 14.17).

As a result of this, there has been a shift in the understanding of the original meaning of this formula in recent Old Testament theology. The new interpretation of "Yahweh sebaot" in Old Testament theology was first put forward by Otto Eissfeldt who published a very important article on the subject in *Miscellanea Academica Berolinensia* in 1950. Eissfeldt suggests that "sebaot" could be understood as an abstract plural in the sense of "Mächtigkeit"/"mightiness" or adjectivally "mächtig"/"mighty", thus joining with the name of Yahweh as "Jahve der Mächtige"/"Yahweh the mighty". It would be one new name of Yahweh. Another German Old Testament theologian, Walter Eichrodt, does not entirely agree with this explanation and points

² In *Vetus Testamentum*, 1967, pp. 76-92.

³ Gerhard von Rad: *Theologie des Alten Testaments* I, 32.

⁴ Robert Dentan: "Exegesis of the Book of Malachi", *Interpreter's Bible* 6, 1124.

⁵ Walther Zimmerli: "Erwägungen zur Gestalt einer alttestamentlichen Theologie", *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 73, 2, 89.

out that the word "sábá" is known only in the sense of "army, military service and service on the front", or of "Masse, Menge"/"mass, multitude".⁶ But in spite of this critical comment, Eissfeldt's understanding of "Yahweh sebaoth" seems to be a step forward in theological understanding and it is supported by many other theologians. However, Eissfeldt later went beyond his original statement. In his article "Zebaoth" in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* VI, 1875, Eissfeldt sees "Yahweh sebaoth" to mean not only "Jahve, der Mächtige" but even "der Allmächtige".

In summary we can say that, according to the Old Testament view, there are different powers in the world—angels, hosts of stars, cosmic and natural powers—which are organized like an army. Above them all reigns the Lord. He is the God of gods. Thus "Yahweh sebaoth" is, on the one hand, literally "Lord of army hosts" but also, if we look for the abstract meaning of this formula, the "Almighty Lord".

2. Translating the formula "Yahweh sebaoth" into other languages

We now reach the decisive question: how should we translate the phrase "Yahweh sebaoth" into other languages? We have shown that "the Lord of (army) hosts", "the Lord of armies" would be a literally correct translation. All modern translations of the Old Testament translate the formula in this way.

This kind of literal translation is, however, not without its difficulties. If we do not have an opportunity to explain its sense, the reader will get the false impression that God is the God of war, which is only a secondary, inadequate meaning of the phrase, indeed one which could be quite misleading. This is, after all, a Hebrew formula, which was clear to the people of the Old Testament without interpretation. The Hebrews understood that angels, stars, natural and cosmic powers were organized like armies. But for the reader of today, a literal translation of this phrase without explanation would be incomprehensible.

It would therefore be better to avoid a literal translation of "Yahweh sebaoth". Luther realised the difficulty and tried to get over it by leaving the Hebrew formula untranslated ("der Herr Zeboath"). The same is found in a Swedish translation ("Herren Sebaot"). But this is a poor solution. Eissfeldt's original proposal in 1950 was to render the phrase "Yahweh sebaoth" as "Yahweh the Mighty". Fifteen years later he corrected this to "Yahweh the Almighty". But these words also translate another Old Testament formula "El Shaddai", "God Almighty". To avoid duplication of terms and also to render the formula "Yahweh sebaoth" more precisely, we suggest the translation "the sovereign Lord of all" ("der allherschende Herr")—a more "royal" concept stressing the kingship of Yahweh.

It would not be the first time that a non-literal translation, which seeks to interpret the meaning of the words, has been made of this Old Testament formula. The same experiment was made in the Septuagint. The Greek reader would not have been able to understand a literal translation of this formula and the translators of the Septuagint were courageous enough to

* W. Eichrodt: *Theologie des Alten Testaments* I, 121 note 71.

translate the theological meaning. The Septuagint renders the formula in three ways: (1) It leaves it untranslated (cf. Luther later); (2) it translates as "Kyrios pantokratór" (the sovereign Lord of all); (3) it translates as "Kyrios dynaméon" (Lord of powers).

The translators of the Septuagint understood the difficulties involved in a literal translation and demonstrate that, because this is a Hebrew formula understood only by Hebrews, we must translate it in a way appropriate to other languages and to peoples with a different cultural and world view.

There is, however, yet another problem involved. If we translate "Yahweh sebaoth" into other languages as "Lord of hosts", it is not only incomprehensible to the non-Hebrew reader, but it produces a discrepancy between the translation of the Old and New Testaments. In many places in the New Testament, "Yahweh sebaoth" is translated as "the sovereign Lord of all" (cf. the New English Bible translation of the Old and New Testaments). In the Old Testament "Yahweh sebaoth" is translated as "the Lord of hosts", but in the New Testament the same formula is translated, under the influence of the Septuagint, in the Revelation of John and once by the apostle Paul as "the sovereign Lord of all", or "the Lord, the Ruler of all being", or "Lord God, sovereign over all" (Rev. 1.18; 4.8; 11.17; 15.3; 16.7; 19.6; 21.22; 16.14; 19.15; 2 Cor. 6.18). A typical instance is Rev. 4.8, which clearly echoes Isa. 6.3. What is the reader to make of this differentiation in the translation of one concept in the Old and the New Testament? There are, of course, differences between the Old and the New Testament, but in this case there is no reason at all to make different translations of this formula.

The idea of "Yahweh sebaoth" is certainly not unknown in the New Testament. The apostle Paul often has it in mind, even when he does not actually use this formula. When Paul speaks of the thrones, principalities, authorities and powers which are made subject to Jesus Christ, the formula "Yahweh sebaoth" forms the background to these ideas. The only difference is that for Paul, and throughout the New Testament, this "Yahweh sebaoth" who is exalted above all dominions is the Lord Jesus Christ himself. "He enthroned him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all government and authority, all power and domination, and any title of sovereignty that can be named, not only in this age but in the age to come." Eph. 1.20-21 (cf. Col. 1.16-17; 1 Pet. 3.22). The idea of Yahweh sebaoth" is therefore present not only in the Old Testament, but also in the New.

We can prove the theological accuracy and authenticity of meaning of this translation by using it in some Old Testament passages. The results will be surprising. In many places in the Old Testament the translation "the Lord of hosts" is colourless and lacking in clarity, while the translation "the sovereign Lord of all" brings alive the biblical message, giving it greater theological significance. For example, if the "Lord of hosts" threatens with punishment, the meaning is not too clear. But if the translation reads that the "the sovereign Lord of all" threatens with punishment, this has much greater significance. Now one can see why the formula "Yahweh sebaoth" was greatly loved by the prophets. It did not mean the theologically colourless "Lord of hosts", but "the sovereign Lord of all", which is full of theological meaning. Another example would be when Hannah went to the sanctuary

at Shiloh to pray to "Yahweh sebaoth" for a son. It makes nonsense to translate that Hannah was going to pray for a son to "the Lord of hosts". The meaning was clear to the Hebrews, but for a non-Hebrew it is illogical. But for Hannah to pray to "the sovereign Lord of all" makes good sense. There are many other Old Testament illustrations of this, e.g. Isa. 6.3; Isa. 24.23; Isa. 29.6 and the refrain from Psa. 46.

It is therefore obvious that the translation "the sovereign Lord of all" is more accurate, stronger, and more theologically meaningful than the literal translation "the Lord of hosts". The original formula was full of meaning, and can only be translated adequately by an equally meaningful formula.

3. "Yahweh sebaoth" in the liturgical tradition of the Christian churches

It is also important to see how "Yahweh sebaoth" is translated in the liturgical tradition of the Christian churches. Not only must the discrepancy between the translation of this formula in the Old and New Testaments be removed, but also between the Old Testament and the liturgy of the Christian churches.

The Orthodox liturgical tradition has preserved the sure knowledge that "Yahweh sebaoth" is in fact "the sovereign Lord of all". It is well known that the concept "pantokratór" as God's second name plays a greater role in the liturgical tradition of the Orthodox churches than of the Western churches. At the conference on Faith and Order held in Montreal in 1964 the concept of "pantokratór" formed the special Orthodox emphasis. Some years ago, when visiting the Orthodox theological faculty in Sofia as a tourist, I had a discussion with the Old Testament professor of this faculty, Prof. Peperoff, on the question of "Yahweh sebaoth". I asked him how the formula was understood in the Orthodox church. He immediately replied in Russian: "Fs'ed'erzhit'el'", "the sovereign Lord of all". Later, when I was visiting the main cathedral of Alexander Nefski in Sofia, the guide showed us the great fresco in the cupola of this cathedral. It portrays God with hands outstretched over all the world. This is the main fresco of the cathedral. How surprised I was when the guide told us that the name of this fresco was "Yahweh sebaoth". (She even said it in Hebrew.) This is how God is represented in the tradition of the Orthodox church.

We also find the idea of translating "Yahweh sebaoth" as "the sovereign Lord of all" in Roman Catholic liturgical tradition. The new 1969 missal of the Roman Catholic church uses the old Sanctus text in Latin: "Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus Dominus Deus sebaoth". But the Slovak translation of the Sanctus, used in the mass in Slovakia, translates this: "Holy, holy, holy, God the Lord of all the worlds". The translation of these words in many African languages is similar to the Slovak translation. The American Roman Catholic mass now has: "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might." Many translations of missals into national languages thus deliberately translate the words "Yahweh sebaoth" as "the Lord of all the worlds". It is clearly a deliberate deviation from the wording of the Vulgate, which translates "Yahweh sebaoth" as "Dominus exercituum" (the Lord of hosts). These translations seem to be a correction of the Vulgate. If this translation is now used in the mass, why can it not also be used in the Bible?

Examples can also be cited from the liturgical traditions of the Church of England and of the Slovak Lutheran Church. When Reginald Heber, bishop of Calcutta, wrote the well-known English hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty" (Isa. 6.3), the words "Lord God Almighty" were a translation of the formula "Yahweh sebaoth".

In the year 1636 Juraj Tranovský of the Slovak Lutheran Church translated Luther's hymn "A mighty fortress is our God". It is remarkable that he translated the words "Er heisst Jesus Christ, der Herr Zebaoth" as "Jest Kristus Ježíš, Bůh a Pán všeho" (Jesus Christ it is, God and Lord of all).

On the other hand, the Jehovah's Witnesses understand Jehovah literally as the God of war and of armies. Christ will come to Armageddon like a marshal with a sword, dressed in armour, and Jehovah will destroy and kill his enemies. By translating "Yahweh sebaoth" as "the Lord of hosts" we are perhaps supporting the ideas of the Jehovah's Witnesses about God.

On the basis of these arguments, I submit for theological discussion in the churches that it would be better in future to translate "Yahweh sebaoth" in the Old Testament not by "the Lord of Hosts", as the majority of Old Testament translations have done until now, but by "the sovereign Lord of all", as in the New English Bible, New Testament, or by some corresponding formula in other languages.

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SOME TRANSLATIONAL NOTES ON THE BEATITUDES

Matthew 5.1-12

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A. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. Comparison and Contrast between Matthew 5-7 and Luke 6.17-49

Even the casual reader will notice that Matt. 5-7 and Luke 6.17-49 differ both in *content* and in *contextual setting*. It is of course immediately obvious that Matthew is much the longer, even though both begin with the beatitudes (Matt. 5.1-12/Luke 6.17-26) and end with the parable of the two house builders (Matt. 7.24-27/Luke 6.47-49). Luke includes only four of the beatitudes (6.20-22), and these are given in the second person ("you") rather than in the third person ("those") of Matthew; and he omits the similes of salt and light (Matt. 5.13-15), even though he later includes material similar to these sayings (Luke 14.34-35; 11.33). Altogether omitted from Luke's Gospel are our Lord's teaching concerning his attitude towards the Jewish Law (Matt. 5.17-20), murder (Matt. 5.21-26), adultery (Matt.