THE TRANSLATION OF ISAIAH 5,1

BY

J.A. Emerton

Cambridge, Great Britain

The problems of Isa 5,1-7, the Song of the Vineyard, continue to exercise scholars, and many discussions of the passage are to be found in articles as well as in commentaries. J.T. WILLIS lists twelve different types of interpretation, and his survey of the debate is not exhaustive. The present article ventures to offer one more discussion of verse 1a but must inevitably discuss it in relation to the rest of the pericope.

This discussion seeks to discover whether it is possible to make sense of the MT as it stands. To say that is not to suggest that the traditional text is always correct and should never be emended. It is only to say that the MT must be the starting point, and that every effort should be made to understand what it is saying, and to enquire whether a plausible interpretation of it is possible. It is reasonable to try to find a coherent meaning. Even if G.R. WILLIAMS is right in believing that there are deliberate ambiguities in Isa 5,1-7, it is still necessary to look for such a coherent meaning, or perhaps more than one.

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A preliminary question of decisive importance for the exegesis of the passage is that of the meaning of līdīḏī and dōḏī in verse 1. yāḏūḏ offers few problems: it can be used in a context of sexual love (Jer 11,15; cp.

1 A list of publications cited in the text of this article will be found at the end. I am grateful to Professor H.G.M. WILLIAMSON for reading a draft of the article and making some helpful comments.
yā'didōt in Ps 45,1), but it can also be used without sexual associations with reference to Yahweh’s love for Benjamin (Deut 33,12) or for his people (Ps 60,7 = 108,7; 127,2). The word is in the masculine gender in verse 1 and is construed with verbs in the third person masculine singular in verse 2, and so it is clear that it is used of a man. If the speaker is Isaiah, who is also male, it is natural to suppose that the word here means ‘friend’ or the like. Since verse 2 refers to the friend in the third person, it is unlikely that the preposition at the beginning of lidīdī means ‘to’. It may mean ‘for’ (so the Revised Standard Version and the New RSV, and the New English Bible and the Revised English Bible). Alternatively, and more probably in this context, it may mean ‘about’ or ‘concerning’ like the same preposition with l’karmō.

The noun dōd has several meanings2. It can mean ‘uncle’, and A.B. EHRLICH thinks that it has that meaning here. But he does not relate his understanding of verse 1 adequately to the problems of the passage as a whole, and he describes the position of uncles in Israelite society in a way that makes too much use of his imagination. The meaning ‘uncle’ may be disregarded because it does not appear to fit the context. In the plural, the word can denote sexual love; and the Song of Songs uses it in the singular of a woman’s lover in a sexual sense (though it does not use the feminine form dōdā of a woman, but prefers ra’yā or kallā).

It is disputed whether dōd can mean ‘friend’ without any sexual overtones, as many translators and commentators have supposed. We have seen that yādīd has both a sexual and a non-sexual meaning, and the same

2 Some scholars have seen in dōdī in Isa 5,1 the name of a god Dod, and have found the same deity in the song of Songs; e.g. H. WINCKLER, “Dido”, Altorientalische Forschungen 1/4 (Leipzig, 1896), 339-343; and T.J. MEEK, “The Song of Songs: the fertility cult”, in W.H. SCHOFF (ed.), The Song of Songs: A Symposium (Philadelphia, 1924), 48-79. MEEK maintains that ‘In dōdī we have none other than a survival of the god name Dod or Adad, the fertility god of the west and the Palestinian counterpart of Tammuz’ (p. 56), because ‘Dod was identified with Yahweh’ (p. 56). On p. 67 he advances the view that in Isa 5,1 ff. and elsewhere ‘we have the prophets railing at the cult and derisively using technical terms and phrases from its liturgy’. W.C. GRAHAM, “Notes on the Interpretation of Isaiah: 1-14”, AJSL 45 (1928-9), 167-178 (especially pp. 167-171), follows MEEK in seeing here a polemic against popular religion. Such views are not discussed in the present article because they seem to me to be far-fetched, and the alleged evidence for a god with a related name in Mesopotamia is open to question (see SANMARTÍN ASCASO, 145-146). See also the discussion by BJÖRNDALEN, pp. 57-66. I had overlooked his discussion of the passage when I wrote the first draft of the present article, and I am indebted to Professor H.G.M. WILLIAMSON for drawing my attention to it.