A NOTE ON THE TEXT OF PSALM XII 9

Few who have studied Ps. xii will dispute Mitchell DAHOOD’s comment on verse 9, “The translation is problematical” (M. DAHOOD, Psalms 1-50, Garden City, N.Y., 1966, p. 75). The verse is usually rendered something like, “On every side the wicked prowl, as vileness is exalted among the sons of men” (RSV), or “The wicked prowl on every side, baseness stands high among the sons of men” (JB). These translations no doubt express the “mood” of the MT, but DAHOOD is yet correct in his judgment. The second half of the line, particularly the phrase בִּלְגֵהּ, is just not clear!

When other ancient translations of the text are considered, the obscurity of the MT is underlined. For the enigmatic בִּלְגֵהּ the LXX translates κατὰ τὸ ψῦχος σου ἐτοιμώρφησας. Ἐ has κατὰ τὸ ψῦχος σου ἐξουθηνηκας. Ἀ interestingly translates κατὰ τὸ ψῦχος εὐνοισμένοι. Finally, Σ reads ὅταν ψυχωθῶσιν οἰ εὐτελεῖς. (cf. F. FIELD, Origenis Hexaplorum, Hildesheim, 1964).

The Hebrew that seems to lie behind the Greek translations is most interesting. Σ appears to have read his Hebrew text as בָּלַגֵּהּ since בָּלַגֵּהּ is used most frequently in the Psalter and elsewhere to translate בָּלָהּ (Jer. xv 19). A root לָבַּה meaning “cheap” (the basic meaning of εὐτελής) cannot be demonstrated indisputably from biblical Hebrew, but it is well-known in Talmudic and later Hebrew (M. JASTROW, Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature, New York, 1950). Ἐ seems also to have worked from a text near that of Σ, but his εὐνοισμένοι seems to indicate a participial form of the root לָבַּה, perhaps תַּבוּל or תַּבוּל. Ἐ seems to reflect a text significantly different. The Hebrew behind Ἐ seems to be something like בָּלַגֵּהּ since Ἐ uses the verb ἐξουθηνῇω / ἐξουθηνῄω / ἐξουθηνῄω in Ps. cxix 118 to translate בָּלָהּ. The translation of Ἐ supplies an important clue for understanding the rendering found in the LXX. The LXX is usually understood as translating either רָכָם חָנָב or בָּלָהּ, since פַּלּוֹפָרֵא is used in Deut. xxx 9 for the Hif’il of the root רָכָם and in Ps. cxxxviii 3 for תָּבָר. But in Prov. iv 8 the verbal form בָּלָהּ is used in parallel with בָּלָהּ, apparently indicating the understanding that the root בָּלָהּ could mean “esteem” (a meaning by no means unrelated to פַּלּוֹפָרֵא). Thus, the LXX may have had a text somewhat like that of Ἐ, but with בָּלָהּ rather than בָּלָהּ. Then, in accordance with Prov. iv 8 (it is interesting to note that בָּלָהּ also
occurs in the LXX translation of Prov. iv 8), the root סלח was understood to mean “to scrutinize”. The text behind the LXX, then, might have been סלח. If the above is correct, we are thus confronted with the following variants for the MT: א: סלח; ב: סלח; ג: סלח; and LXX: סלח.

The key to making sense of these variants is found in redividing the MT of xii 9. Instead of maintaining the text as it has been received and reading סלח, the text should be redivided and read סלח. If the nun of the verbal form סלח had mistakenly been read as an archaic ending on the preceding verb, a problem would quickly have developed around סלח. The easiest solution would have been to read the nun with the preceding consonants, creating the term סלח, and work from there. ב, for instance, seems to work from a text where the difficulty was met by doubling the nun to give סלח. ס and the LXX sought the verb in the second term of the phrase, but worked from texts where סלח had been confusingly preserved as סלח. (The personal suffix on סלח probably developed in an effort to make sense out of this difficult text.) ג had a text (or interpreted a corrupt text) probably nearer the original Hebrew text with verb followed by subject. Indeed, if the reading of ג fit the context more clearly, it might be preferred. But all of the above variants can be understood as resulting from the misdivision of the received text. When the text is divided as suggested above, the problem is removed and the verse makes excellent sense, as we shall see below.

When we divide the text as suggested, the second half of xii 9 begins מלחות. מלחות is an infrequent term in the Hebrew Bible. It occurs in only one other place, 2 Kings xxiii 5, where it is used with the phrase “the sun, the moon, and all the host of heaven”. It is clear that some astronomical reference is intended, and the context makes clear that מלחות is among that group of objects being falsely worshipped in Judah during the early reign of Josiah. The LXX does not translate the term, but transliterates with μαζευρώθ. This transliteration is interesting, for the same is found in Job xxxviii 32 where the MT reads מלחות. (The confusion between r and l is frequent and occurs in many different languages.) The מלחות in Job stands parallel with Hebrew terms denoting Orion and Pleiades. Whether the term is a singular or collective cannot be conclusively settled, but syntactically it is handled as a singular, which is important for its possible occur-