THE MEANING OF ŠÈN.Á’ IN PSALM CXXVII 2

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The problem with which the present paper is concerned is the meaning of the last clause of Ps. cxxvii 2, and especially of šÈná’, which is usually translated ‘sleep’. Verses 1 and 2 are rendered as follows in the Revised Version:

1 Except the LORD build the house,
   They labour in vain that build it:
   Except the LORD keep the city,
   The watchman waketh but in vain.

2 It is vain for you that you rise up early, and so late take rest,
   And eat the bread of toil:
   For so he giveth his beloved sleep [Or, in sleep].

Although the problems of the last clause are the subject of this paper, the Hebrew of the whole of verse 2 will now be quoted:

צָאָה לַכָלָה מַעֲלָה יַעֲבִּרְיָהְוָם
אָכַל לָהּ הַעָנָבָם כִּי יֲחַדְּרֵי שָׁנָּה

I

Before the problems of the last clause of verse 2 are discussed, the principal variants and the renderings of the ancient versions will be considered.

It is unnecessary for the present purpose to set out the different ancient versions of the first part of verse 2, but several comments

1) A list of works cited by their authors’ names will be found at the end of the article. I am indebted to Professor Sir Godfrey Driver for reading and commenting on the first draft of the paper.

2) See B. Kennicott, Vetus Testamentum hebraicum, cum variis lectionibus, II (Oxford, 1780). The following editions of the versions have been used: LXX — A. Rahlfs, Psalmi cum Odis (2nd ed., Göttingen, 1967); Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion — F. Field, Origines Hexaplorum quae supersunt (Oxford, 1875); Jerome — R. Weber et al., Biblia sacra vulgata versionem (Stuttgart, 1969); Peshitta — W. E. Barnes, The Peshitta Psalter (Cambridge, 1904); Targum — P. de Lagarde, Hagiographa chaldaica (Leipzig, 1873).

Vetus Testamentum, Vol. XXIV, Fasc. 1
may be made on them. First, the fact that the LXX has τῷ δρόμῳ τῶν, where the Massoretic Text has maskímê, does not necessarily imply a Hebrew reading haškim (or, as Praetorius supposes, haškîm). Secondly, the probability that the LXX’s μετὰ (also found in Symmachus) implies the reading of m’hry as a preposition is unimportant for the present discussion. Thirdly, it is similarly unimportant that the Peshîta has the third person throughout. Fourthly, the word which is pointed ha ‘asabbîm in the Massoretic Text is translated as if it were ba‘asabbîm by Theodotion and Quinta (ἐνδολακον), by Jerome’s Psalterium iuxta Hebraeos (‘idolorum’), and probably by Sexta (πληνῆς); reference will be made below to their way of reading the Hebrew consonants.

The principal ancient versions of the last clause of the verse need to be set out in full:

LXX: τῶν δῶ τῶν ἀγαπητῶν αὐτῶν ὁπῶν.

Aquila, Symmachus, and Quinta (in the Syro-Hexaplar): . . . ἱστρεμεν ἱστρέμεν.

Jerome: ‘sic dabit diligentibus se somnum’.

Peshîta: . . . ἱστρεμεν ἱστρέμεν.

Targum: אָּבִיתִּי וּהלְּהַה לְרָדִירָה דְּמַכָּה.

Kennicott records variant readings for three words in the clause. The first is the plural in place of the singular in most manuscripts; there are also two examples of what appear to be spelling mistakes. The plural reading has the support of the LXX, Jerome, and the Peshîta, but it is unnecessary to discuss it here; both readings make sense, and neither has any bearing on the problem of the meaning of ἱνα. Secondly, some manuscripts spell the last word of the verse ἱνα, and some add the letter yod as a mater lectionis between the first and second radicals. These variants too may be ignored for the present purpose. The use of ‘aleph, instead of he, at the end of a feminine noun is found a number of times in the Old Testament, and it is usually ascribed to Aramaic influence. Thirdly, in place of כ there is a variant כ, which is probably presupposed by the LXX. This third variant may be of greater importance, and it will be discussed later.

II

What is the context in which the problematical final clause of verse 2 is found? The psalm falls into two parts, which some scholars believe to have been originally two distinct poems. The two parts are probably linked by the thought of ‘house’, meaning a building in