

Luther's Rendition of II Samuel 22:36 and Psalm 18:36:

Und Wenn Du Mich Demuetigest, Machst Du Mich Gross.

By Paul W. Peters

Everyone who is well acquainted with Luther's rendition of verse 36 in David's Psalm as recorded in II Samuel 22 and Psalm 18 and who has often used these words to comfort himself and others, is loath to part with them. *Daechsel's Bibelwerk*, although it calls this rendition "an inadmissible translation linguistically speaking" (*eine sprachlich unzulässige Uebersetzung*), nevertheless pleads strongly for its retention. It already has worked such a blessing, Daechsel argues, and the sincere Bible reader has grown so fond of it because of its deep trend of thought and genuine truth conducive to godliness, that it should not be deleted from Luther's Bible. To our knowledge the modern revisions of Luther's Bible have retained Luther's original rendering till this day. Comparing it, however, with the rendering given to this verse by our Authorized Version, to wit, "Thy gentleness has made me great," we cannot refrain from inquiring into the meaning of the original Hebrew text.

In II Samuel 22 our words go to make up the second line of a distich and consist of but two Hebrew words:

וְעִנְתָּךְ תִּרְבֵּנִי. In Psalm 18 our words are the third line of a tristich and read in the Hebrew: וְעִנְתָּךְ תִּרְבֵּנִי.

There is but one difference between these two Hebrew parallel lines, which the reader will readily detect in the first word of each of the two lines. As a result we have two variant readings in our Massoretic text. II Samuel 22 has וְעִנְתָּךְ תִּרְבֵּנִי, while Psalm 18 reads וְעִנְתָּךְ תִּרְבֵּנִי. The Massorettes either derived the infinite עִנְתָּךְ of II Samuel from the stem ענה, to answer (favorably), to hear, understanding the passage to mean: "And Thy hearing, i.e. Thy hearkening has made me great," or they derived it from ענה meaning "to be lowly," *niedrig sein*, and wanted it understood to mean, "Thy being lowly, *dein Niedrigsein* has made me great." In Psalm 18 according to the pointing of the Massorettes we have the noun עִנְתָּךְ, which is related to the stem ענה meaning "lowly" and is to be translated: "Thy humility (condescension!) has made me great." Whether the Massorettes presupposed one or two stems when pointing the two words עִנְתָּךְ and עִנְתָּךְ remains a question. If they did the latter, then these two words have two different meanings, "hearing" and "humility." Delitzsch's laudable attempt to give one and the same meaning to both words, although he also traces them back to two different stems, may satisfy the homilist but not the lexicographer. "Hearing" and "humility" linguistically speaking are two different words and convey two different meanings. Consequently the Versions old and new chose either the one or the other or both or have recourse to a third reading and meaning.

The Septuagint of II Samuel 22 translates our line: Καὶ ἡ ὑπακοή σου ἐπλήθυνέ με, "and thy favorable hearing has made me great." According to Thayer ὑπακοή in the Septuagint does not have the New Testament meaning of "obedience," "submission," but rather of "favorable hearing." This being the case, it is a rendering of עִנְתָּךְ in the Massoretic text. The *Editio Lagardiana** of the Septuagint read our word as a Piel Infinitive, וְעִנְתָּךְ, but had recourse to a Greek noun as an equivalent: Καὶ ἡ παιδεία σου, "Thy chastening made me great." Strange to say the Septuagint of Psalm 18 also uses παιδεία, thereby again suggesting עִנְתָּךְ as the original wording. It even uses παιδεία in two clauses, thus creating a new distich: Καὶ ἡ παιδεία σου ἀνώρθωσε

* Note that in some editions of the Septuagint, these references are to Psalm 17.

με τέλος, και ἡ παιδεία σου αὐτή με διδάξει, “And thy chastening has upheld me to the end; yea, thy chastening itself shall instruct me.”¹

The Vulgate in its translation of Psalm 18:36 slavishly follows the Septuagint with its two clauses: *Et disciplina tua correxit me in finem, et disciplina tua ipsa me docebit*, “And thy discipline has corrected me unto the end; and thy discipline, the same shall teach me.” In translating II Samuel 22 however, it does not make use of one or the other of the Septuagint versions, but of Aquila’s ἡ πραοτης σου, thy gentleness, and the Itala’s *mansuetudo*. These renderings suggest the reading of עֲנֹוּהָ, although they are not the exact equivalent of this Hebrew word which means “humility” and is otherwise not applied to God.

Our Authorized Version has taken over the meaning of the Greek πραοτης and the Latin *mansuetudo* and has made use of it both in II Samuel 22 and Psalm 18: “And thy gentleness has made me great.” Since “gentleness” is not, we repeat, an exact translation of the Hebrew עֲנֹוּהָ, and since “humility” in the Old Testament is not applied to God, “condescension” has been suggested. But Briggs in *The International Critical Commentary* states categorically that this rendering “usually given here is without authority, and to be rejected.” “It has been chosen,” as the Pulpit Commentary admits, “because it is the quality in God which most nearly corresponds to humility in man.” Expedience has dictated this term and we must remain conscious of the fact that it is not an exact equivalent of עֲנֹוּהָ, “humility.” Humility is that which the humble are to seek as they are to seek righteousness (Zeph. 2:3), for “by humility and the fear of the Lord are riches, and honour, and life” (Prov. 22:4; cf. also 15:33 and 18:12). This use of עֲנֹוּהָ in the Old Testament is to be kept in mind in judging Luther’s rendition of our two parallel lines: *Und wenn du mich demütigest, machst du mich gross.*

We know from Luther’s manuscripts and from his work on the translation of these two words that in 1523 he had rendered the Samuel passage: *Vnd dyne sanfftmutickeyt wirt mich mehren.*² a manuscript of the year 1523/4, which contains a translation of the Psalms by Luther, we find that he again translated: *Vnd deyne sanfftmut macht mich gros*, only to delete these words and to change them into: *Vnd du mich demütigest machstü mich gross.*³ Nevertheless *Das Alte Testament* of 1524, in as far as it had then been edited, still has the translation: *Vnd deyne sanfftmutikeyt wirt mich mehren.*⁴ However *Die Deutsche Bibel* of 1545 has the final rendering: *Vnd wenn du mich demütigest machstu mich gross.*⁵ It is quite apparent that Luther had to cope with the text and its meaning before he could decide on a definite and final rendering.

From his two commentaries on Psalm 18 we can also learn much concerning his study of our text. In his *Operationes in Psalmos* of 1519–1521 he gives thought to the lengthy Latin rendition of Psalm 18:36 which reads: *Et dedisti mihi protectionem salutis tuae, et dextera tua suscepit me. Et disciplina tua correxit me in finem, et disciplina tua ipsa me docebit.* Luther has this to say on it: “I do not know whence this verse has come. In the Hebrew there is instead of all this but one verse which reads as follows: *Et dedisti mihi clypeum salutis tuae, et dextera tua confortavit me, et mansuetudo tua multiplicavit me.* Here nothing is said,” Luther continues, “of discipline, of correction, of purpose, of doctrine. But also in II Samuel 22, where we read in consequence of a copyist’s error, *Et mansuetudo mea* for *mansuetudo tua*, the line: *Et dextera tua suscepit* is omitted.”⁶

This is a fine example of Luther’s going back to the Hebrew original in order to find out, if possible, the exact wording of a verse. Yet he does not at once discard the Latin translation of our verse. He is concerned about it and asks: “But now what shall we do with our translation: ‘I am being corrected unto the end by the

1 For this meaning of עֲנֹוּהָ cf. Ezek. 19:2 and Lam. 2:22, where we, however, find רַבָּה in the Piel form.

2 Weimarer Ausgabe, Deutsche Bibel, 1. Bd, p. 135.

3 Ibid., p. 470.

4 Ibid., 9. Bd, p. 376.

5 Ibid., 9. Bd, p. 377.

6 Ibid., 5. Bd, p. 531; St. Louiser Ausgabe, IV. Bd, p. 1108.

discipline of the Lord and am being taught by the discipline of the Lord? ' It could have the same meaning as, 'I am being made great through the kindness of the Lord' (*per benignitatem dei*). But so much effort and torture is required to give expression to this meaning by means of such contrary words, that it is preferable to pass them by and to content ourselves with the Hebrew text and meaning."

Although Luther is discarding the translation of the Vulgate in favor of the Hebrew text, still he prefers to retain in his *Operationes in Psalmos* the meaning of "gentleness" (*mansuetudo*) and then of "favor" or "kindness" for the word עֲנֹתָי. His interpretation of our Psalm verse bears this out: "The whole victory," he says, "which the Church gained over her enemies after she had learned to war with her hands and her bronze arms, she does not ascribe to herself, but in pious gratitude to Him who gained it, as if she wanted to say: That I have not succumbed in this battle for godliness, and that the pure doctrine of faith has remained unsullied, is due to the fact that your salvation was my shield and that your favor (*favor tuus*) upheld me. In consequence of this miracle I see that it was alone through your kindness (*tuae fuisse solius benignitatis*) that I have grown in numbers after the foe has been vanquished... It always depends upon divine gentleness (*mansuetudinis divinae est*), whenever we are preserved and increased in numbers, and not upon our presumption, so that the glory may continue to be God's alone."

Although Luther in these his *Operationes* operates exclusively with עֲנֹתָי as "gentleness," "favor," and "kindness" of God, in his *Short Commentary on the First 25 Psalms of 1530* he explains עֲנֹתָי as meaning the humility with which God humiliates one. It is here that we should let Luther speak in his own characteristic manner: *Humiliatione tua multiplicasti me. Du hast mich in manche pericula gesteckt, als mit dem Absalom, (hic enim transit ad domestica bella), hast mich seer geplaget, bin aber da durch gros geworden. Das tous man mercken, das unser herr Gott einen zuuorn klein macht, ehe denn er yhn gros macht. Hoc se David quoque expertum dicit: Du liessest mich ein stucklein sehen durch den Absolon. Ibi vere humiliabar. Sic tamen factum est, ut me multiplicaveris. Sie wolten sich darnach nur umb yhn zureissen, Juda und Israel, ein iglichs wolt yhn allein gantz haben.*

In this commentary Luther makes use of a new Latin translation: *Humiliatione tua multiplicasti me* and interprets accordingly: "You have submitted me to many dangers as in the case of Absalom, you plagued me very much, yet thereby I became great. One must bear in mind that our Lord God first makes one small before he makes one great. This is what David said that he experienced: You let me experience something through Absalom. There he truly was humiliated. Yet it turned out that you made me great. After that there was a great scramble for him, Judah and Israel, each one laid an exclusive claim on him," Luther concludes his short exposition of our verse.

Luther has given us two interpretations of our two words, the one in the years 1519–1521 based on the translation of the Vulgate, which is also that of our Authorized Version, the other on the basis of two Greek versions, a rendering of the Piel Infinitive עֲנֹתָי with its objective suffix, "When you humiliate me you make me great." Luther's translation has this in its favor that he retains the original meaning of the root word ענה, to be lowly, *demütig sein*. Kittel having translated עֲנֹתָי of Psalm 18:36 with *deine Herablassung*, nevertheless adds in a footnote: *Eigentlich deine Demut, daher Luther, wenn du mich demütigst.*⁷ Luther's translation also differs in this from all others that he uses the verb form of ענה and the Piel at that, which can very well have been the original reading of the text in both Samuel 22 and Psalm 18.

⁷ Kittel, *Die Psalmen*, p. 65.

But the final word concerning this rendition will always be that it has gained a foothold firmer than that of any of the many others,⁸ including our Authorized Version, in the hearts and minds of its readers. We do not only still find it in our German Bible, it is there to stay.

⁸ Modern versions do not add anything to our knowledge of our two passages, since they either use the rendering of one of the older versions (Moffat) or translate on the basis of a textual change of the text. Thus the Revised Standard Version reads: "And thy help made me great," which presupposes the textual change: **וְעִזָּרְתִּי**. In Psalm 18 we find the same rendition. *An American Translation* makes use of the same textual change. Another textual change suggested by modern Old Testament scholars reads: *wetsinnathekha thesukkeni*, "Thy shield protects me." These and other textual changes are found inadequate by modern scholars themselves. Menge renders freely: *Und deine Gnade machte mich gross*.