

Exegetical Brief: They Pierced My Hands And My Feet (Psalm 22:17)

John F. Brug

One of the most interesting and significant textual variants in the Old Testament occurs in Psalm 22:17 (22:16 in English). The Hebrew text reads:

17 כִּי סָבְבוּנִי כְּלִבִּים עֲדַת מְרַעִים הִקִּיפוּנִי כְּאַרְיֵי יָדַי וְרַגְלָי:

The NIV translates:

"For dogs have surrounded me;
a band of evil men has encircled me,
they have pierced my hands and feet.

The critical words are the last three words of the verse. In translating, "they pierced my hands and feet," the NIV is adopting a different reading than the Masoretic text, which reads, "like the lion (כְּאַרְיֵי) my hands and my feet." A number of Greek and Hebrew manuscripts lend support to the reading preferred by the NIV.

Because of the importance of this passage we will take a more detailed look at the textual evidence.

- 1) The readings כָּאָרוּ and כָּרוּ, found in a few Hebrew manuscripts, are 3rd plural perfects from verbal roots כָּאָר or כָּוַר, which mean "they pierce" or "they dig." The difficulty with these readings is that the verb here translated "pierce" is usually spelled כָּרַה, and it usually refers to digging more than to piercing. Even in Psalm 40:7 this verb appears to refer to the digging out or the opening of the ears, not to the piercing of the ear described in Exodus 21:6.
- 2) The Septuagint reading ὄρυσξαν also means "they pierce" or "they dig." This understanding is followed by the Syriac, the Old Latin, and the Vulgate (*foderunt*). The rendering of Aquila's first edition, ἤσχυναν (they disfigure), also appears to support this reading.
- 3) Jewish revisions of the Septuagint by Aquila and Symmachus read "they bind" (ἐπέδησον and δῆσαι). Jerome supports this reading in his *Psalterium iuxta Hebraeos*, which reads *vinxerunt* (they bind). An alternate reading in the *Psalterium iuxta Hebraeos* is *fixerunt* (they fasten [to the cross]). These renderings seem to be a guess, an attempt to find an appropriate verb with "hands and feet."
- 4) A solution which retains the consonants כְּאַרְיֵי is to repoint these consonants as a plural participle of כָּאָר, (either as the construct כְּאַרְיֵי) or as the absolute with omission the final ם), "they are piercing my hands and feet."
- 5) The Masoretic reading is supported by a Greek manuscript from the Cairo Genizeh (ὡς λέων).
- 6) The Targum seems to be collating both readings, "they bite like a lion" (נִכְתָּן הַיָּד כְּאַרְיָא).

It is significant that all the ancient versions agree that the word in question is a verb form. Only the pointing of the Masoretic text adopts the reading as a noun, "lion." This reading, which eliminates any possibility of a reference to crucifixion, was finalized long after Christ fulfilled this prophecy. It is possible that polemics between Christians and Jews had an influence on the Masoretic pointing of this word. Luther believed that the text had been distorted by Jewish interpreters to deny the messianic implications. The reading "like a

lion" may, however, simply be a misunderstanding of a difficult text, which was suggested by the mention of attacking animals in the context.

Many modern translations either follow the Masoretic text or emend the text in some other way to avoid any possible implication of crucifixion. The New RSV, for example, renders "My hands and feet have shriveled." The modern critics' prejudice against messianic prophecy may be reflected in the statement of the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* that כרה may mean bind only in Psalm 22:17 (VII, p 305).

Psalm 22:17 may be one of the comparatively rare cases in which other versions preserve a better reading than the standard Hebrew text. If we accept the NIV translation, the verse is a striking description of the process of crucifixion. The combination "hands and feet" is very specific. It is difficult to imagine why this wording would be chosen to describe the wounds inflicted by a lion. This unusual combination lends support to the traditional claim that we have here an allusion to Jesus' crucifixion. It is noteworthy, however, that this passage is not cited as messianic in the New Testament although several other verses of this psalm are.