

SCHOLIA

RECENT TRANSLATIONS OF GENESIS 3:15

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THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH has always rightly regarded God's words spoken to the serpent in paradise as constituting the first glimmer of salvation, the proto-evangelium. This understanding of Gen. 3:15 has not gone unchallenged. Some modern Old Testament theologians take sharp issue with it. Says Gerhard von Rad : "The exegesis of the early church which found a messianic prophecy here, a reference to a final victory of the woman's seed (Protevangelium), does not agree with the sense of the passage, quite apart from the fact that the word 'seed' may not be construed personally but only quite generally with the meaning 'posterity,' " (*Comm. on Genesis* [Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1961], p. 90).

Quite a different challenge to the traditional Christian understanding of this passage comes from the side of the newer Bible translations. A comparison of these translations demonstrates a significant margin of uncertainty with respect to the actual words God spoke to the serpent. The intent of this brief study is not to discuss the entire prophecy contained in Gen. 3:15 but to offer a critical comparison of the various recent translations offered. The logic for this type of comparison is obvious. If the church is going to continue to regard these words as a broadly messianic promise it should be reasonably sure as to what it is that is being promised. It is at this point that the variety of English renderings enters in. Which one of the several offered shall the interpreter choose?

Variant translations of Gen. 3:15 are by no means a phenomenon of recent origin. Already the Septuagint rendered the word *shuph*, traditionally understood as "bruise" or "crush," by quite a different word, meaning to guard or to watch. The Vulgate chose two different words, respectively describing what the woman's seed would do to the serpent and what the serpent would do to the woman's seed. The first word, *conterere*, means "to crush," while the second word, *insidiari*, means "to lie in

wait." The fact is also well known that the LXX chose to render the Hebrew pronoun *hu'* with *autos*, making it a masculine, whereas the Hebrew does not demand anything more than a neuter. The Vulgate, on the other hand, rendered this same pronoun with the feminine *ipsa*, thus giving support to a mariological understanding.

The purpose of the following comparison of translations is primarily to localize the problem-areas which the translator confronts. The scope of this scholion will not permit a full-fledged discussion and resolution of these problems.

Here, then, is a listing of some of the representative translations of Gen. 3:15:

- ASV And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed: he shall bruise (mg. note: lie in wait for) thy head, and thou shalt bruise (mg. note idem) his heel.
- RSV Essentially the same, minus the notes.
- American Translation I will put enmity between you and the woman, And between your posterity and hers; They shall attack you in the head, And you shall attack them in the heel.
- JB I will make you enemies of each other you and the woman, your offspring and her offspring. It will crush your head and you will strike its heel.
- NEB I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your brood and hers. They shall strike at your head, and you shall strike at their heel.
- NAB I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; He will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel.
- Zurcher Bible Und ich will Feindschaft setzen zwischen dir and dem Weibe and zwischen deinem Nachwuchs and ihrem Nachwuchs; er wird dir nach dem Kopfe treten, and du wirst ihm nach der Ferse schnappen.

Dutch New Version	En Ik zal vijandschap zetten tussen u en de vrouw, en tussen uw zaad en haar zaad; dit zal u den kop vermorzelen, en gij zult bet den hiel vermorzelen.
Swedish of 1917	Och jag skall satta fiendskap mellan dig och kvinnan, och mellan din sad och henries sad. Denna skall sondertrampa ditt huvud, och du skall stinga den i halen.

The following problem areas emerge from this comparison.

(1) How to render the word *zera*^c, traditionally translated "seed." (2) What pronoun to use to refer to the agent which will "bruise" the serpent's head. (3) Is "bruise" (or "crush") the best word to use here? A subsidiary question is whether the same word should be used for both activities, that of the woman's seed toward the serpent and vice versa.

Let us tabulate the results on the basis of this threefold division.

- As to (1): Most translations have abandoned the literal translation "seed," probably for reasons of clarity. Substitutes are: "posterity," "offspring," "brood." The Dutch and Swedish retain "seed."
- As to (2): At this point the range of translations includes "he," "they," and "it." (Knox, following the Vulgate has "she.")
- As to (3): Some translations keep "bruise" in both instances (RSV and DNV). Some substitute an identical other word in both instances: "lie in wait," ASV margin; "attack," American; "strike at," NEB and NAB. A third group uses two different words for the two activities respectively: "crush" and "strike" (JB) : "treten nach" and "schnappen nach" (ZB) ; "sondertrampa" and "stinga" (Swedish).

At this point I wish to append a few brief comments with regard to each of these three translation problems.

Translation Problem One: How to render the Hebrew zera^c.- The substitution of the word "seed" by a more modern word such as "offspring," or "brood," offers no great difficulty. While regular Bible readers are used to the word "seed" this word is

certainly not current in the English language of today as a designation of offspring.

The real question at this point is whether the word *zera*^c is meant to convey the idea of offspring, or at least whether or not this is the sole intent of the word as used here. The answer to this question depends on several other considerations which can only be mentioned very briefly within the compass of this discussion. The first consideration concerns the parties to the conflict which is here foretold. The narrator of Genesis 3 clearly suggests the presence of an actual snake in the story of the temptation. He compares this "serpent" with all the other beasts of the field which the Lord had made. Focussing on this aspect first of all, the question should be faced: does the word *zera*^c indicate the "offspring," or "brood" of snakes?

The Lexicon informs us that the Old Testament uses *zera*^c very infrequently for the offspring of animals. One instance given by B.D.B. is that presently under discussion. One other instance listed is Gen. 7:3, but this passage is hardly a convincing illustration of the point at issue. The purpose for taking the animals into the ark was not actually to keep their offspring alive. This offspring was not yet present at the time these words were spoken. How could it have been kept alive in the ark? Some modern translations have sensed this problem and have avoided the word "seed" or "offspring" altogether at this point: RSV, "to keep their kind alive"; JB, "to propagate their kind." I believe that an appeal to Gen. 7:3 to prove that *zera*^c occasionally is used as "offspring" in the case of animals is not a strong one.

Another point to be considered is whether the story of the fall suggests the presence of more than a mere animal. If the story does suggest the presence of a demonic force acting behind and through the snake, how does this affect the question of the meaning of *zera*^c? As to the presence of a force other than a mere animal in man's temptation, I believe that as one reads Genesis 3 one does indeed become conscious of such a force. There is a diabolical subtlety in the serpent's suggestions which points to a sinister background to his words. Later Scripture abundantly confirms this opinion. It should be clear that the presence of a demonic agent in the temptation very definitely affects the

question of how to understand *zera*^c. The Bible nowhere suggests that demons can have offspring in the sense of progeny or posterity. When, nevertheless, the word *zera*^c is used with respect to the serpent it must, when Satan is in view, have a non-literal meaning. As such this poses no great problem. It only points to the complexity of the meaning of *zera*^c: literal "offspring" in the case of the woman, probably also with respect to the serpent, although there the evidence is less clear, and finally a non-literal use of *zera*^c when applied to the one whom the serpent represented as spokesman.

There is still another use of the word *zera*^c which may have played a role at this point. One definition given by B.D.B. of *zera*^c is: "seed as marked by moral quality = persons (or community) of such a quality." Passages listed include Prov. 11:21 ; Jer. 2: 21; Mal. 2:15; Is. 1:4; cf. Is. 65:23; 61:9; 65:9. Newer translations have captured this aspect of the word *zera*^c quite admirably. Thus Prov. 11:21b is rendered by JB as follows: "but the race of the virtuous will come to no harm" (lit.: the *zera*^c of the virtuous). RSV renders the same phrase simply: "but those who are righteous will be delivered." Similarly JB translates Is. 65:23 as follows : "for they will be a race blessed by Yahweh, and their children with them." This passage makes quite clear that the word *zera*^c may be distinguished from "offspring" (ASV renders: "for they are the seed of the blessed of Jehovah, and their offspring with them").

If this meaning of *zera*^c would play any role at all in Gen. 3:15 then one might, while retaining something of the "offspring" notion, understand the two "seeds" to stand for two "races," two "communities," each marked by a moral quality. These communities are headed up by two distinct principals, the one principal being the woman, the other the serpent, each of which had just been set at enmity with the other by God himself. Upon this view both of these "seeds" could be found among the children of men. This would then alleviate the difficulty of having to take the word literally in the one instance and figuratively in the other.

Translation Problem Two: How to render the pronoun hu'.--
In the Hebrew text this pronoun refers back to *zera*^c, which is a

masculine word. Thus the masculine *hu'* could simply be explained in this sense. Since in English the word "seed" is neuter one could defend the choice of "it" as a translation for *hu'*. This is the way the King James Version rendered it, though both ASV and RSV use "he." The Dutch New Version retains "it." This reflects the ambiguity of the original and, in a certain sense therefore, might be called a good translation.

However, the rendering "he" has also some very ancient and venerable support. The Septuagint chose that word (Greek: *autos*). This choice is all the more remarkable since the Greek, in distinction from the Hebrew, has a choice of masculine, feminine, and neuter. The Greek word for "seed" (*sperma*) being a neuter, the Septuagint could have followed this up with a neuter (*auto*). Apparently it felt the personal reference at this point to be strong enough to choose *autos* instead. And, indeed, something of the personal next to the collective does play a role in this passage.

But grammatically the pronoun *hu'* refers back to *zera^c*. Since *zera^c*, whether taken as "community," "race," or as "offspring," involves a plurality, the translation "they" can certainly be defended. It need not detract from the broadly messianic understanding of the passage, though the Septuagint rendering would clearly make this understanding much more explicit. But the Old Testament arrives only gradually at the idea of a personal Messiah.

It is possible, of course, that the choice of the plural pronoun "they" in some of the modern versions proceeds from a view which is incompatible with the understanding of this passage as a protevangelium. However we cannot be sure of motivations. The mere choice of the plural pronoun is not impossible grammatically and can be combined with the broadly messianic understanding of the passage, the singular being comprised within the plural. Even the NEB, which chooses to use "they," cannot get around the reference to "your head" and "you," both singulars, when spoken of the serpent. In other words, it is the head of the serpent, not that of his *zera^c*, which is in view here. And again, it is the serpent, not his *zera^c* which will "bruise" the heel of the woman's *zera^c*.

Another thing of importance to note at this point is the fact that the Hebrew, by using the independent personal pronoun *hu'*, thereby kept the verb forms of "to bruise" in the singular. There would have been the possibility, consistent with other Hebrew usage, of following the singular *zera*^c with a plural verb form. Such usage is quite common when it comes to collectives such as *zera*^c. But the use of *hu'*, in itself not necessary in an ordinary Hebrew predicate, served to place emphasis on the basic unity underlying the plurality.

Translation Problem Three: How to render "shuph"?-This question has several aspects. (1) Should a relatively weak word be used, such as "strike at," or a stronger one, such as "crush"? (2) Should one and the same word be used for what the woman's "seed" does to the head of the serpent and for what the serpent will do to the heel of the woman's "seed"? (3) What is the exact meaning of *shuph*? (4) What is the temporal scope of the activity here envisaged in the context of the divine pronouncements upon man, woman, and serpent?

None of these questions can be treated in complete isolation from any of the others. Perhaps we might start by calling attention to the relatively heavy emphasis which the passage places on the idea of "enmity." This word, by virtue of its forward position in the Hebrew sentence, a position which interrupts somewhat the normal flow of the Hebrew sentence structure, indicates the true purpose of the divine deliverance at this point. It would seem that the conclusion is warranted that the emphasis was placed not so much, or at least not in the first place, on the victory gained in this conflict, but on the fact of the conflict itself and on the way in which this conflict was to express itself as long as it lasted.

If this should be the correct understanding of the passage's chief intent, the choice of a weaker word as a translation of *shuph* would not be out of place. The purpose of the passage, upon this assumption, would not primarily be to describe the outcome of the conflict but rather the way in which this conflict was to express itself as long as it lasted. In this connection it can easily be seen that if "crush" were to be chosen for what would happen to the head of the serpent and if this crushing blow

were to be linked with Christ's victory over the devil at the cross, then, in terms of this passage at least, the enmity of which it speaks could no longer be exercised. One of the combatants would have been knocked out. Yet, as was noted, it was this enmity and its mutual expression in terms of the Hebrew verb *shuph* that was made to stand out in this passage.

The problem confronting us here could easily be solved if the meaning of this Hebrew word was itself unambiguously clear. On this point there is no unanimity among Biblical expositors. Hengstenberg, (*Christology*, I, p. 26) confidently asserts that the verb in the other two O.T. passages where it occurs "undeniably signifies: 'to crush,' 'to bruise.'" Von Rad, in his commentary ad loc., states: "Philologically the verb *shuph* cannot be explained satisfactorily." The current Hebrew lexicons appear to support this latter contention. Even this does not settle all questions, but it should be kept in mind.

As was noted above, the choice of a weaker word for the activity by which the enmity expresses itself is not of recent origin. The Vulgate used *insidiaberis* for what the serpent was going to do to the seed of the woman. And the Septuagint used *tereoo* (watch, guard) in both instances. Similar approaches can be found in the modern versions. The lexicons suggest that, while in both instances the word *shuph* is used, its meaning in the second instance may be closer to the Hebrew *sha'aph* (gasp, pant after). This may well be the reason why the translation "lie in wait" (ASV, margin) has been chosen as an alternative (cf. also the Vulgate: *insidiaberis*).

In view of the relative obscurity of the meaning of *shuph* and in view of other considerations, such as the scope and intent of the passage, the translation "strike at," as found in both NEB and NAB should be given serious consideration. One obvious advantage of this rendering is that it maintains, also in English, the parallelism found in the Hebrew. One and the same word is used for both activities. This translation also removes the difficulty, experienced by some interpreters, of how to conceive of the attack of a snake upon a man's heel in terms of "crushing." These are definite advantages.

Are there any disadvantages? Is the Christian understanding of this verse impaired by the suggested rendering? The first

answer to this question should be that it is ultimately the sense of a given passage of Scripture itself that determines what should be its "Christian" understanding. But in the second place, in view of what was noted above about the prominence given to the notion of enmity, and also in view of the fact that this first "glimmer of salvation" stands at the beginning of man's journey through time as God's fallen creature, the use of the verb "strike at" appears well suited to express the thought God had in mind. Would it not be in keeping with the nature of the scene that God, at this early point in redemptive history, was looking forward not in the first place to its midpoint, the cross, but rather that he announced a condition which would prevail from the beginning of that history to its very end? And if so, would not a milder term such as "strike at," be preferable? This is not to deny the crucial significance of Christ's death on the cross as a definitive blow to Satan's power. Yet, as is well known from passages such as Rev. 12:13 and 17, the devil's power is still to be reckoned with. This aspect could be more easily explained in terms of Gen. 3:15 if the verse did not have in mind *primarily* what would happen when Christ died on the cross, even though that too would be one very significant instance of the "enmity" and of the way in which this enmity expresses itself.

What should also be noted in this connection is that the surrounding context seems to suggest a situation which reaches as far as the horizon of time. The snake's curse, woman's childbirth in pain, man's work in the sweat of his face, these are conditions that are coextensive with mankind's history short of consummation. Would it be strange if, in this setting, the Lord had spoken of a perennial and sustained enmity, set and maintained by him, which was to last as long as time would last? And would not that be another reason why a rendering such as "strike at" would have much to commend itself?

It has been frequently pointed out that since in the one instance the head is affected and in the other "only" the heel, this passage should be taken as an unambiguous indication of future success and victory on the part of the woman's seed. But others have countered by saying that the relative position of the two combatants, man and snake, make the use of these two modes of attack inevitable. But is a snake bite, even when aimed at

the lowly heel, meant to be any less lethal than when a man strikes at a serpent's head?

If the above approach to this problem should commend itself, does it mean that this passage is devoid of the gospel which the Christian church has found in it? I do not think so. The mere fact of God's "setting" of the enmity is a tremendous initiative for good, unexpected and unmerited. Man's alignment with the forces of evil is broken through. And, though upon this approach this passage does not explicitly predict ultimate victory of the woman's seed, nevertheless the One who set the enmity might also be regarded as implicitly guaranteeing the ultimate success of those who are on his side. Although much remains yet to be said in later revelations, what is being said is of such significance that the term "protevangelium" may be rightly used to describe it.

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