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A NEW PROPOSAL FOR AN OLD CRUX IN EZEK 2:6

ABSTRACT

*The well-known text-critical problem in Ezek 2:6 with regard to the phrase **כִּי סָרְבִים וְסִלּוּגִים אוֹתָךְ** has given rise to various interpretations. The one currently most widely accepted was made by Zimmerli in his commentary on Ezekiel, but this does not solve all the problems related to this phrase. Some scholars accept the reading of the Masoretic Text, albeit with a different interpretation of the words in the phrase. Others propose emendations, but the proposals do not solve all the problems. The versions demonstrate that they had a problem with the reading as well. In the proposed solution to the problem, it is accepted that the Septuagint and the Masoretic text contain two different editions of the book of Ezekiel, and that different proposals are needed for the two editions. Proposals are made for solving this problem in each of the two editions. The problems with the reading of the Masoretic text are discussed first, followed by a discussion of the renderings of this phrase in the versions. It is proposed that the text underlying the Masoretic text should have been **כִּי סִלּוּגִים וְסָרְבִים סְבִיבוֹתֶיךָ**, while the Septuagint is based on the following reading: **כִּי סִלּוּגִים וְסָרְבִים סְבָבִים אוֹתָךְ**.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The well-known text-critical problem in Ezek 2:6 with regard to the phrase **כִּי סָרְבִים וְסִלּוּגִים אוֹתָךְ** has given rise to different suggestions. The one currently most widely accepted was made by Zimmerli (1979) in his commentary on Ezekiel, but this does not solve all the problems related to this phrase. This article will present a survey of proposals in this regard and will also deal with the phrase as it occurs in the different versions. In the proposed solution to the problem offered here, it is accepted that the Septuagint and the Masoretic text contain two different editions of the book of Ezekiel, and that different proposals are needed for the two editions. Proposals are made for solving this problem in each of the two editions. The problems with the reading of the Masoretic text will be discussed first, followed by a discussion of the renderings of this phrase in the various versions. Then the views of editions and scholars that do not propose to emend the text will be discussed, followed by a discussion of editions and scholars that do propose emendations. Finally, a new proposal will be made.

2. THE PROBLEMS WITH THE READING OF THE PHRASE IN EZEK 2:6

The Masoretic text has the reading mentioned in the introduction: כִּי אֶתְּךָ וְסִלּוֹנִים וְסִרְבִּים אֶתְּךָ. The main problems with this reading concern the meaning and origin of the two words סִרְבִּים and סִלּוֹנִים, as well as the use of the particle אֶתְּךָ. If the first two words are to be regarded as nouns, the fact is that the word סִלּוֹנִים occurs only here and in Ezekiel 28:24, while סִרְבִּים occurs only in this verse. If the two nouns are retained, the next problem is the particle אֶתְּךָ, since this particle normally follows a verb to indicate the object of that verb. If it is taken as a variant form of the preposition אֵת, it would still constitute somewhat strange syntax, with a probable meaning of: “thistles and briars will be with you.” This reading is indeed still adopted by some scholars.

3. THE RENDERINGS OF THE VERSIONS

Before looking at some possible solutions to the problem, the rendering of this phrase in the versions will be discussed.¹

The Septuagint took the two words as participles, rendering them as follows: διότι παροιστρήσουσι καὶ ἐπισυστήσονται ἐπὶ σὲ κύκλῳ (“for they will go mad and gang up against you all around;” cf. Muraoka 2002:440). It has rendered the two problematic words of the Hebrew as verbs, παροιστρέω and ἐπισυνίστημι.

The Peshitta reads as follows: גִּזְתִּים מַחְסֵלֵי לִי (“because they boast and despise you”). It has also interpreted the words as participles. For the Hebrew root סרב it has used the cognate verb in Syriac ܣܪܒܐ, with the meaning “to talk foolishly,” or “to boast.” For סלונים it has used the verb ܣܠܗ “to despise” or “to reject.” In both instances it has used a participle.

The Vulgate renders the phrase under discussion with *quoniam increduli et subversores sunt tecum* (“because incredulous people and destroyers are with you”).

1 For the different texts the following editions were used:

Hebrew: Elliger & Rudolph (1984) (BHS).

Septuagint: Ziegler (1977).

Peshitta: Mulder (1985).

Vulgate: Weber (1969).

Targum: Sperber (1973).

The Targum reads אַרְי מַסְרַבִּין וּמִקְשָׁן לְקַבְלָךְ (“because rebels and objectors are opposite you”). It is clear that both the Targum and Peshitta read the Hebrew words as verbal forms.

4. EDITIONS AND SCHOLARS ACCEPTING THE READING OF THE MASORETIC TEXT

Cooke (1970:34) accepts the reading of the Masoretic text. He mentions the versions that regard the two words as participles, referring to the readings of the Septuagint and the Peshitta. His objection is that the participles would require a subject preceding them (Cooke 1970:36). The NIV translates with “though briars and thorns are all around you,” a rendering perhaps influenced by a part of the reading of the Septuagint. The reading of the Masoretic text is accepted without any comment by Cooper (1994:73, 77).

Greenberg (1983:60) accepts the traditional rendering as well (“for thorns and nettles are with you”). According to him, the meaning “nettle” for the hapax legomenon סָרְבִים is conjectured from its association with סְלוֹנִים. This word is probably the same as the word סְלוֹן in Ezek 28:24, where it is used parallel to קוֹץ (“thorn”). He discusses the use of participles in the versions, but remarks that the reference to scorpions in the next phrase makes it preferable to take these two words as referring to “stinging things” (Greenberg 1983:66).

Driver (1934) accepts the traditional reading of the Masoretic text, but gives a new interpretation of the two words. He regards the traditional translation (“though briars and thorns be with thee” – Driver 1934:54) as an ugly mixture of metaphors. He also questions the philology behind that interpretation. He offers an alternative interpretation for the reading of the Masoretic text, with reference to Aramaic and Syriac parallels. He is of the opinion that the Hebrew סַבֵּב means something like “babblers,” “liar” or “rebel” (Driver 1934:55). He prefers not to link סְלוֹן to סְלוֹן in Ezek 28:24, but rather to a root סָלַה, with a meaning akin to “blasphemer” or “traitor.” He thus regards the variant of Theodotion (δύσκολοι και ἀπειθεῖς – “discontented and disobedient people”) and Jerome (*increduli et subvertores*) as more accurate than the other versions. He would then translate the phrase with “for praters and traitors or recusants and rebels are with thee” (Driver 1934:56).

Garfinkel (1987) rejects this interpretation by Driver. However, his approach is similar to that of Driver in the sense that he retains the reading of the Masoretic text, but presents a new interpretation. In his interpretation he accepts the meaning “thistles and thorns” for the two

words in question (cf. Garfinkel 1987:237), but prefers to see the scorpions of the next phrase not as stinging insects, but as a reference to a plant (cf. Garfinkel 1987:430-437). Not one of the commentaries published since the appearance of the article in 1987 has followed this interpretation. The article is, however, very important for its treatment of the different interpretations of the two words in question. It thus presents a very useful *Forschungsgeschichte*.

In his discussion of Ezek 2:6, Garfinkel (1987:426-428) lists four difficulties related to the interpretation of the instruction to Ezekiel not to fear:

- It appears abruptly within the message about Israel's unwillingness to repent;
- The two words in question are both rare;
- The reference to the people as thistles and thorns is uncommon, even unique;
- The linking of this phrase to the idea of sitting among scorpions is perplexing. He refers to Driver's description of this as an ugly metaphor.

He distinguishes two different interpretations of this verse, namely that it either tells Ezekiel that the people would reject his message, or that they would be a thorn in his side. He thinks that the second is more plausible within the context of an instruction not to fear (Garfinkel 1987:427). He then discusses these two interpretations, referring to *inter alia* Cornill, Driver, Cooke, Greenberg and Zimmerli, discussed elsewhere in this article (Garfinkel 1987:428-430). In his conclusion he accepts the traditional interpretation of the two Hebrew nouns (Garfinkel 1987:429), and then proceeds to argue for a related meaning for עֲקָרְבִים (cf. Garfinkel 1987:430-437).

The Hebrew University Bible edition of Ezekiel (Goshen-Gottstein & Talmon 2004:5) does not propose an emendation of the Masoretic text, but it has notes attached to both the nouns under discussion. Both these notes (3 and 4) point to the rendering of the phrase under discussion by the Septuagint. The note on עֲקָרְבִים refers to the whole Greek phrase (παροιστροήσουσι καὶ ἐπισυστήσονται ἐπὶ σὲ κύκλω), while the note on אֲוֹתָיִם וְסִלּוֹנִים refers to the last part of the Greek rendering, from καὶ onwards. The note on עֲקָרְבִים rejects the suggestion of Zimmerli as accepted by BHS. It describes the rendering as “apt,” indicating that, contrary to appearance, it is suitable (cf. Goshen-Gottstein & Talmon 2004:xxvii). The rendering could be due to a problematic lexical identification of the word in the Hebrew by the translator. This could

perhaps be related to the interchange of a nominal or verbal form, or to a different interpretation of the Hebrew, with the two nouns parallel to the scorpions of the next phrase (cf. Goshen-Gottstein & Talmon 2004:5, n. 3). The note on **אֹתָךְ וְסִלְוֹנִים** indicates that the Greek gives a “picture of riotous banding together,” a further change caused by **κύκλω** (cf. Goshen-Gottstein & Talmon 2004:5, n. 4). The Greek could reflect an interpretation based on etymology derived from a root **סל(ה)**. This is supported by references to the Targum (Lam 1:15) and Peshitta (Num 16:24, Jer 20:10 and Ezek 16:37). They want to retain the reading of the Masoretic text and ascribe the Greek rendering to the translator, and not as reflecting a different *Vorlage*.

5. *EDITIONS AND SCHOLARS EMENDING THE READING OF THE MASORETIC TEXT*

Cornill (1886:188) proposed the following reading: **כִּי סוֹרְבִים וְסוֹלִים אֹתָךְ**. He translates this as: “wenn sie dir widerstreben und dich verachten” In this reading he accepts the rendering of the Peshitta as a good rendering of the original. He regards the reading of the Masoretic text as very strange. He remarks that the reading of all versions contains participles. He equates the reading of the Septuagint with a Hebrew **סוֹרְרִים וְסוֹלִים**. None of these versions had a reading **סִלְוֹנִים** in their *Vorlage*. He regards the reading of the Peshitta as the most convincing. The Aramaic root **סרב** should not be strange in Ezekiel and the root **סלה** also occurs in Ps 119:118. This suggestion of Cornill was accepted by Herrmann (1924:50).

According to the footnotes 6a (in agreement with the Septuagint) and 6b, *Biblia Hebraica Kittel* (Kittel 1962:813) wanted to change the reading as follows: **כִּי סַבְבִּים סִלְוִים אֹתָךְ** (“when thorns were surrounding you”). This makes sense, but the problem of the subject following the participle remains. The consequent suggestion of Zimmerli (1979:90-91), accepted by BHS footnote 6b-b, is to change the word order to **כִּי סִלְוִים סַבְבִּים אֹתָךְ**, giving the same meaning as the proposal of BHK. Zimmerli regards the Hebrew (“for rebellious people and thorns are with you”) as unsatisfactory. He says that the **κύκλω** of the Septuagint points to some form of the root **סבב** in the Hebrew original. He then regards **סַבְרִים** as a scribal error for **סַבְבִּים**. He considers the reading **סַבְבִּים אֹתָךְ** as a satisfactory equivalent of the Greek phrase **ἐπισυστήσονται ἐπὶ σὲ κύκλω**. The Greek **παροιστρέσουσι** means “to unsettle by stings,” and in this way the Greek rephrases the Hebrew word for “thorns,” resulting in a good parallel to the scorpions mentioned later in the verse. Block

(1997:121) retains the Masoretic text, but says in a footnote that this suggestion of Zimmerli “strenghtens the force of the argument.”

Allen (1994:11) is, however, critical of this suggestion. He wants to retain the reading of the Masoretic text, including the reading of **אוֹתְךָ** in the sense of “with you, in your presence.” He admits, however, that the meaning of the preceding words is doubtful and discusses some of the proposals made. He thinks that the equation between **סְלוֹנִים** and the similar noun in Ezek 28:24 is reasonable and that the other noun should have a similar meaning, thus supporting the traditional interpretation, but preferring the meaning “nettle” to “brier.” He mentions the interpretation of the Septuagint, Peshitta and Targum, with the link to the Aramaic or Late Hebrew verbs for “rebel” and “despised,” as discussed above. As far as Zimmerli’s reconstruction and retroversion are concerned, he regards the word order as being problematic. The first verb in the Septuagint is used in Hos 4:16 to translate **סָרַר** as “to be stubborn.” In Ezekiel the word **סָרְבִים** was translated in the Septuagint, according to him, on the basis of the first two consonants.

6. *A NEW PROPOSAL*

It has become clear that the book of Ezekiel has been transmitted in two editions. The two editions do not differ as much as the two editions of Jeremiah, but the Septuagint is still about seven percent shorter than the Masoretic text. When making a new proposal, one has to keep in mind that the work of scholars such as Tov (1999), Lust (1986) and Bogaert (1986) is very important. It may be possible, and indeed seems plausible, that the Septuagint and the Masoretic text reflect different stages in the history of the transmission of the text of Ezekiel, which implies that the same solution will not explain the readings contained in the two texts. The Peshitta and the Vulgate represent the same tradition as the Masoretic text, albeit that there may be important differences between them as well. The same is true of the Targum, though the Targum of Ezekiel is often quite free. As far as the relative age of the two editions is concerned, it is generally accepted that the Masoretic text represents the earlier edition. In the case of this edition, the suggestion of Zimmerli makes very good sense, and is the generally accepted reading underlying the Masoretic text. The proposal is then to read this verse as follows:

וְאַתָּה בֶן-אָדָם אֲל־תִּירָא מֵהֶם וּמִדְבָרֵיהֶם אֲל־תִּירָא כִּי סְלוֹנִים
סָרְבִים אוֹתְךָ וְאֲל־עֲקָרְבִים אֶתָּה יוֹשֵׁב מִדְבָרֵיהֶם אֲל־תִּירָא
וּמִפְגִּיָּהֶם אֲל־תִּתַּחַת כִּי בֵּית מְרֵי הַמָּה:

The change from this reading to the reading contained in the Masoretic text can be ascribed to two different processes. In the first instance the two words סְלוֹנִים and סְבִיבִים were switched, and secondly a graphic confusion led to the change from ב to ר in סְרָבִים. This was then followed by insertion of ׀ to link the two nouns of the final text.

This proposed correction of the Masoretic text does not, however, solve all the problems related to the Septuagint. In the Septuagint of Ezekiel the word κύκλω is usually a translation of some form of the Hebrew word סְבִיב. In this instance this word with the suffix of the second person masculine singular could account for the phrase ἐπὶ σὲ κύκλω in the Septuagint. If the two Hebrew nouns are switched, as in the proposal, the confusion through haplography of סְבִיבוֹתֶיךָ and סְרָבִים can explain the reading proposed for the Masoretic text, with אוֹתְךָ as the result of the haplography, and to make sense of the remaining letters ׀ is added. The result would be that the following reading underlies the rendering of the Septuagint:

וְאַתָּה בֶן־אָדָם אֶל־תִּירָא אוֹתָם וּמִפְּנֵיהֶם אֶל־תִּחַת כִּי סְלוֹנִים
וְסָרְבִים סְבִיבוֹתֶיךָ וְאֶל־עֲקֵרְבִים אֶתָּה יוֹשֵׁב מִדְּבָרֵיהֶם אֶל־תִּירָא
וּמִפְּנֵיהֶם אֶל־תִּחַת כִּי בֵית מְרֵי הֵמָּה:

This seems a plausible solution to the problems related to the Septuagint. There remains, however, an important problem with this suggestion. In this reading proposed for the text underlying the reading of the Septuagint the word סְרָבִים occurs. It is, however, omitted in the reading proposed by Zimmerli, but it appears again in the current reading of the Masoretic text. This means that the word appears, disappears and appears again. That is most improbable. The only solution is to accept the word as occurring in the original reading, but that the word סְבִיבִים occurred as well. This would then result in the following reading:

וְאַתָּה בֶן־אָדָם אֶל־תִּירָא אוֹתָם וּמִפְּנֵיהֶם אֶל־תִּחַת כִּי סְלוֹנִים
וְסָרְבִים סְבִיבִים אוֹתְךָ וְאֶל־עֲקֵרְבִים אֶתָּה יוֹשֵׁב מִדְּבָרֵיהֶם אֶל־תִּירָא
וּמִפְּנֵיהֶם אֶל־תִּחַת כִּי בֵית מְרֵי הֵמָּה:

What happened then in the reading of the Septuagint is that סְבִיבִים אוֹתְךָ were combined by the omission of the last letters of the first word and the first letter of the second, giving סְבִיבוֹתֶיךָ. For the reading of the Masoretic text, סְבִיבִים was omitted and the two nouns were switched. This gives a reading that could explain both the readings of the Masoretic text and the Septuagint.

7. CONCLUSION

The reading proposed above can be regarded as a possible explanation of the readings contained in the Masoretic text and the Septuagint of Ezek 2:6, while accepting that the book testifies to two editions. The renderings of the Vulgate and Peshitta can be regarded as attempts to make sense of the difficult Hebrew text of their *Vorlagen*.

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