

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

into his storehouse, then the painful mystery of Providence is no longer painful to us, no longer a mystery even : and we, like the holy Apostle, shall know both how to be full and how to be hungry, how to abound and how to suffer need ; how to be poor, yet make many rich ; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing ; chastened, yet not broken down ; dying, yet, behold, we live.

S. COX.

PRECEPT UPON PRECEPT.

ISAIAH XXVIII. 7-13.

As few passages of Scripture are oftener quoted than the tenth verse of this Chapter, it is, to say the least of it, *unfortunate* that it should be misquoted almost as often as it is quoted. Still more unfortunately, it is commonly used in a sense the very opposite to that in which it was originally employed. It is commonly taken as a grave description of the abundance and variety of the means of grace which God has vouchsafed to the Church ; whereas it is, really, a drunken sneer at the poverty and simplicity of the means vouchsafed to the Church of Isaiah's time. How often have we been urged, in sermons, to admire the grace of God who, in condescension to our needs, has spoken to us at sundry times in divers manners—giving us 'precept on precept, precept on precept, line on line, line on line, a little here, and a little there!' How often have we heard good men, in their prayers, thank God that He had thus graciously condescended to our infirmity, repeating one and the same truth, in

many different forms, again and again—giving us ‘precept on precept, precept on precept, line on line, line on line, here a little, and there a little!’ And yet, if those who have so often quoted the verse in this sense had but read the words which precede and follow it, they surely would have seen reason to doubt whether they had grasped its true meaning. Even in our Authorized Version, which in this Chapter is unusually weak and defective, there are indications which might well have made them pause before concluding the verse to be a serious description of the mode in which God has revealed his will to men; there are many indications that it was originally a jest, or satire, on Isaiah’s mode of uttering the Divine message. And no sooner do we turn to the Original, and study it, than the case becomes clear; we see that, beyond a doubt, we not only have here a jibe at Isaiah from the lips of drunken men, but that the verse is so constructed as to imitate their thickened and difficult pronunciation.

The story of the verse, briefly told, is as follows. Isaiah uttered the prophecies contained in Chapters xxviii.—xxxiii. during the early years of the reign of king Hezekiah. The Hebrew people had then, for some years, been under the yoke of Assyria. That yoke had grown intolerable to them; they were intent on throwing it off. Now there was no truer patriot in the land, no more hearty friend of liberty, than the Prophet. But he saw there was no hope of ordered freedom and a settled peace while the people remained godless and corrupt. He counselled them, therefore, to wait—to strengthen them-

selves in piety, in an unselfish devotion to the public welfare, and in the practice of private virtue, until, God being on their side, they were able to break the power of Assyria, and to assert their own independence. The counsel was unwelcome to the 'sinful people.' They had no mind for a private and public reformation; nor were they disposed to wait before they struck a blow for freedom. They were fain to try policy and statecraft before they fell back on the dismal alternative of virtue and godliness. What if they were to call Egypt to their help against Assyria, to pit the one great military tyranny of the time against the other? Might they not *thus* work out their salvation?

'No,' said Isaiah in the name of God, 'your salvation will not be from men,' and set his face like a flint against the Egyptian alliance. But there were not wanting other counsellors who could speak in a more popular strain. There were plenty of priests in Jerusalem, plenty of prophets even, who, as they shared the popular vices, were willing to pander to the popular whim or passion. And these priests, in their smirched ephods, these prophets, 'wearing a hairy garment to deceive,' were all for policy rather than for piety; they gave back the popular wish in the swelling periods of their inflated rhetoric—advocating the alliance with Egypt, and denouncing the counsel of Isaiah as base and unpatriotic.

In their private intercourse with each other, moreover, when, as Isaiah tells us, they 'were swallowed up of wine,' and went altogether 'out of the way through strong drink,' insomuch that their tables were 'full

of filthy vomit;’ in their shameless carousals the false priests and the prophets who backed them with ‘lying visions’ made themselves great sport in jeering at Isaiah, in ridiculing the one prophet who cared more for the welfare of the people than for their applause, and loved the service of God more than the pleasures of the senses. They mocked at his incorrigible simplicity. They mimicked and burlesqued his manner of speech. ‘Whom would *he* teach knowledge?’ they cried; ‘and to whom would he make a message intelligible? To weanlings from the milk, just withdrawn from the breast?’ To them he seemed an intolerable moralist, for ever schooling them as if they were babes and needed the mere milk of instruction, not strong men capable of digesting meat. ‘With him,’ they said, ‘it is always “precept on precept, precept on precept, line on line, line on line, here a little, and there a little.”’ Or, as we may perhaps better translate their words, they said, ‘With him it is always “bid and bid, bid and bid, for-bid and for-bid, for-bid and for-bid, a lit-tle bit here, a lit-tle bit there.”’

The words, indeed, may be translated in many ways; for, in the Original, they are more like the babble of drunken men than sober and intelligible speech. At the same time, although the words manifestly imply the condition of those who uttered them, they were evidently designed as a burlesque imitation of the great simplicity of speech which Isaiah used. Monosyllable is heaped on monosyllable; and, no doubt, the speakers tipsily adopted the tones of fond mothers addressing their babes

and weanlings. Using the Hebrew words of the verse, one of these shameless roysterers would say : “ *Tsav la-tsav, tsav la-tsav; kav la-kav, kav la-kav; zeeir sham, zeeir sham* : that is how that simpleton Isaiah speaks.” And then, doubtless, a drunken laugh would go round the table, and half-a-dozen of them would be saying their *Tsav la-tsav, tsav la-tsav* at once.

What really angered these burly scorners was that the Prophet treated them as though they were children only just weaned, and not as masters in Israel, giving them the most elementary instruction in the simplest words—words of one syllable, as they put it. Just as the philosophers of Athens called St. Paula *σπερμολόγος*,—*i.e.*, ‘a collector of seeds,’ a dealer in unconsidered trifles, so these false priests and prophets derided Isaiah as for ever vexing them with petty and interminable chidings. They were weary of hearing him repeat the first rudiments of morality, and apply them to the sins and needs of the time. How dared he tutor them who were themselves teachers! How dared he treat them as babes who were grown men, distinguished men, the foremost men and statesmen of the empire! A pretty figure *he* made too! No one listened to him, or hardly any one. It was *their* advice which was taken, not *his*; their policy which was followed, not his. And yet he dared come to them day after day with the same simple message, the same trite moralities, the same dismal warnings and rebukes!

It is easy to imagine how these proud prosperous men would lisp out their drunken sneers over their

wine at the solitary unsuccessful Prophet, and think it an infinite good jest to make him, and his message, and the very manner in which he uttered it, a theme of mockery and contempt. Nor is it difficult to imagine the heat of righteous indignation with which he would turn on these blind guides, who were only too surely leading their blind followers into the ditch, and forewarn them that the retribution they had provoked by their sins would speedily overtake them. In effect he said to them : 'You mock at the simple Divine words I have been moved to speak, and lisp out your base and drunken imitations of them, — you, who should be the first to welcome and enforce the word of God. Know, then, that God will punish your sin by *a people of lisping lips and an alien tongue*. He has taught you, by the words you deride, where you might find rest and freedom, how you might give peace to the people who are weary of war and its calamities ; but you would not hearken and do. The word of the Lord has become to you a mere "bid and bid, forbid and forbid," at which you jest. Know, then, that that Word, which might have been a light to your path, shall blaze up into a consuming fire. You jeer at it as an endless series of petty injunctions, and therefore it shall inflict on you an endless series of intolerable calamities. In the very teeth of that Word, you are about to strike a blow for freedom,—seeking it in your own way, not in God's way ; and as a reward and consequence of your disobedience, the Word, that might have given you freedom and a stable security and peace, shall become a stone on which you shall fall and be

broken, a net in which you shall be taken and bound, a trap in which you shall be caught and imprisoned."

The prediction was fulfilled. The fierce Assyrians, when they heard that the Hebrews had allied themselves with Egypt, once more swept through the land. The very men who had lisped their scornful imitations of Isaiah's words, who had affected to think that he used the broken and imperfect dialect which mothers employ to their babes, were destroyed or taken captive by the Assyrian troops, whose language, while it closely resembled that of the Hebrews, had just those differences which made it sound to them like an imperfect and barbarous dialect. So terrible, and so exact, was the retribution that fell on their sin.

Though the mills of God grind slowly,
 Yet they grind exceeding small ;
 Though with patience He stands waiting,
With exactness grinds He all.

S. COX.

THE SEPTUAGINT TRANSLATION.

II.

THE remarks made in the last number of THE EXPOSITOR about the character of the LXX. translation, its value, and the main phenomena which it presents, will readily be illustrated by examining some of the peculiarities of the version in any single book. One of the historical books of the Old Testament will best suit our object, because they furnish us with a good average specimen of the merits and defects of these Jewish translators. I do not indeed propose to sub-