

King of Shame

Some years ago, I heard a sermon from the Old Testament in which the pastor read a text which says that the sun lights our way. He talked about how it was fortuitous that this word, “sun,” sounds like “son,” and he went on to draw the conclusion that this particular verse in the Bible points us to Jesus Christ who is the “Son.” Nothing that this pastor said was particularly wrong, but the way he drew his conclusions does not work in every language. It certainly doesn’t work in the Hebrew (the language of the Old Testament), for the words for “son” and “sun” are very different from each other. Nor could this particular sermon be translated into French (son=fils; sun=soleil) or Spanish (son=hijo; sun=sol), although it might work in Dutch (son=zoon; sun=zon). What this pastor neglected to do was check the original languages, producing a sermon that could well have gone very wrong. When reading a passage of Scripture in English we need to be careful that we don’t make the text say something that the original languages don’t allow. In other words, let’s be careful when drawing conclusions such as the one this pastor drew.

At the same time, there are times when translations don’t necessarily reveal the wordplays found in the original languages. The Hebrew language doesn’t normally contain vowels when it is written, so to pronounce a word, one must be familiar enough with the language to be able to discern what the vowels might be. (For example, even without vowels, we can understand the following sentence even without its vowels: Jhn thrw th bll.) Originally the Hebrew Bible didn’t contain the vowels either, but at some point, Jewish scholars added vowels (which appear below the consonants), making the Bible easier to read for those who might not be adept at reading Hebrew. Most recognize that those who added the vowels were doing a degree of interpretation, although most also agree that the interpretation is the correct one. In other words, we can trust that not only the consonants constitute God’s revealed word but the vowels, which were added later are also included in that inspiration. (The scholars were very careful when they added the vowels, drawing on the wisdom and experience of hundreds of years of the work of other scholars.)

Because Hebrew didn’t have vowels originally, readers of Hebrews could add wordplays as they read the text aloud. Most people would have caught them immediately and would have appreciated what the reader was doing. Sometimes the reader would substitute the vowel pronunciation of one word into another to make a point. The example which follows shows this well.

The Hebrew consonants that are translated as “king” are “mlk”. Normally “king” is pronounced as “melek.” The Hebrew word for “shame,” when pronounced, usually uses the vowels “o” and “e.” There is an Ammonite god who the Israelites called “Molek,” sometimes written “Molech” in our English Bibles. Molek was a terrible god who people believed accepted the sacrifice of children. Thus, the letters, “mlk”, when read in reference to the Ammonite god were not pronounced “melek,” meaning king, but rather, “Molek,” meaning “shameful king” or “king of shame.” What an appropriate name for such a terrible god! The worship of Molek was the epitome of shameful for the Israelite people who had substituted their holy and righteous God for the Ammonite god.

We miss this play on words in the English language and even a reader of Hebrew might miss the play on words. But if the Bible was read aloud, the listeners would have not missed it. In 2 Kings 23:13, the words, “king,” and “Molek” appear in the same sentence, and we can well imagine that there was no mistaking that Molek was the “king of shame” as the reader spit that word out of his mouth as he would spit something distasteful. This is the verse where we learn that King Solomon had introduced the worship of Molek to the Israelites by building a shrine to Molek. This, by the way, was the reason that Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, did not become king of all 12 tribes of Israel, but, rather, was given reign over only two of the tribes while his rival, Jeroboam became king of the 10 northern tribes. It is as if the author of 2 Kings is almost saying that King Solomon was a little like the god he introduced, a “king of shame” as well, for it was shameful what he did. Solomon’s actions eventually led to the destruction of God’s people and their exile into Assyria (722BC) and Babylon (586BC).

It is also telling that the longing of God’s people, following the eventual destruction the kingdom of Judah (consisting of the two tribes) in 586BC and the later restoration of Israel, was for a new king, a Son of David. Solomon was not truly a Son of David, at least not in the way he led the people, for he turned them away from the Lord. The people were longing for someone like King David, who was not a king who led the people away from the Lord but, as Scripture says, was a man after God’s own heart. Years later, when Jesus was nearing the end of his earthly ministry, the people hailed him as the Son of David, not only because he descended from David, but also because he was like David in that he made it his ministry to bring the people back to the Lord. This is the kind of king that people wanted, for they had come to know what the “king of shame” had done to them.

While we may not have anything as terrible as a god like Molek, many of our leaders (political, economic, educational, and sometimes even religious) are leading us away from the Lord. We might say that they are little “Moleks,” representatives of that terrible god. The world will not do well under their reign. The Catechism says, however, that we are called “Christians,” because, paraphrasing the Catechism, we are anointed and appointed to be representatives of the Son of David, fighting against sin, offering ourselves sacrificially to the work of the Kingdom, and being representatives of Jesus Christ as we make his reign over this world known so that this world will be brought back to God. To do this well, of course, we must not follow the way so of the Molek but, rather the ways of Christ whose ways are often quite different from the ways of the world.

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