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https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibs-01.php

A Note on 2 Samuel 1:23

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This article considers a possible textual corruption in 2 Sam 1:23, arguing for a new translation based on a reconstruction of the original Hebrew: "Saul and Jonathan, who loved and cared for each other while they lived, were not separated in their death"

Within the text of David's lament for Saul and Jonathan in 2 Samuel 1:19-27, v. 23 has come in for special scrutiny from modern commentators. The Masoretic Text of this verse reads as follows:

שָׂאֵל וַיְהוֹנָתָן הַנְּאוֹהִבִים וְהַנְּעִימִם בְּחַיֵּיהֶם וּבְמוֹתָם לֹא נִפְרְדוּ מִנְשָׂרִים קֶלֶד מֵאֲרִיזוֹת נְבָרוּ
and was translated accordingly by KJV, "Saul and Jonathan were lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided: they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions." This reading of the verse has been followed by RV and NIV but is fundamentally flawed. As early as the last century, Driver noted that שָׂאֵל וַיְהוֹנָתָן הַנְּאוֹהִבִים וְהַנְּעִימִם are in apposition with the phrase שָׂאֵל וַיְהוֹנָתָן and so cannot form its predicate. Two alternative translations were therefore mooted by Driver. The first of these sees v. 23 as a *casus pendens* which is resumed by v. 24: "Saul and Jonathan, the beloved and pleasant in their lives and (who) in death were not divided...Ye daughters of Israel, weep over Saul",¹ while the second involves moving the *zaqeph* in the first half of the verse from הַנְּעִימִם וְהַנְּאוֹהִבִים thereby making the phrase לֹא נִפְרְדוּ the predicate of שָׂאֵל וַיְהוֹנָתָן and translating: "Saul and Jonathan, the beloved and the pleasant, in their lives and in their death were not separated."²

¹ More recently, S. Gevirtz, *Patterns in the Early Poetry of Israel* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963] 91-92), noting the imbalance of the parallelism, suggests introducing a verb הִלְכְדוּ or דָּבְקוּ after הַנְּעִימִם, thereby obtaining "...the beloved and pleasant! / In their lives they were joined / And in their death they were not divided."

² S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Books of Samuel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1890) 184. Nevertheless, P. A. H. de Boer ("Sur la massore de 2 Samuel 1,23," *Hen* 3 [1981] 22-25) and R. P. Gordon (*1 & 2 Samuel* [Exeter: Paternoster, 1986] 212) continue to uphold the Masoretic verse division.

The latter translation is favoured by RSV and NRSV, and has proved most attractive for modern commentators: the image conjured is of “the legendary solidarity...of father and son, which cannot be set aside by the most powerful enemy.”³ Yet, whichever way the verse is translated, it is also noticeable that the description of Saul and Jonathan (“the beloved and the pleasant”) as it stands contributes nothing to the statement that they were inseparable in either or both of their lives or deaths—the final clause of v. 23a therefore appears to be something of a *non sequitur*.

A closer examination of the terms הנעימים and הנאהבים may hold the key to this dilemma. The latter הנאהבים is a Niphal participle and is mostly translated passively (“the beloved”), while the former is apparently a defectively spelt plural of the adjective נעים “gracious.” Now, the Niphal stem can also have the sense of reciprocal action, as Hertzberg has already pointed out (cf. GKC 51d).⁴ Thus, one could translate הנאהבים as “who were beloved to each other” or “who loved each other.” Unfortunately, the same cannot be done with הנעימים as it stands, but it is at this point that the “defective” spelling of the adjective may be revealing. If, while retaining the current Masoretic division of the verse, one transposes the consonants yodh and mem to form the word הנעימים (pointing likewise as a Niphal participle with reciprocal meaning), one may translate: Saul and Jonathan, who loved and cared for each other while they lived, were not separated in their death.”

³ J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in the Books of Samuel, Volume II* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986) 668. H. W. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel* (German Original: *Die Samuelbücher* [ATD 10; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960]; OTL; London: SCM, 1964) 235.

⁴ Hertzberg, *Ibid*

It may be objected that the verb נָעַם is not otherwise attested in the Niphal stem. However, even a verb as common as אָהַב occurs in the Niphal in the OT only here. Possibly, one or both forms were coined by the writer of the lament. In favour of this suggestion is that the proposed הִנְעַמְתִּים would balance הִנְאִהְבִּים in 23a α and indeed נִפְרְדוּ in 23a β . The latter two, which are clearly Niphal, would therefore have acted as a “signal” to the original reader as to the correct pronunciation. By this relatively minor emendation, a suitable precursor to the statement that Saul and Jonathan “were not separated in their death” is provided: the original error in the text can be accounted for by a simple slip of the copyist's pen.

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