

# About Strokes, Lions, Hands and Feet

## *Textual notes on Psalm 22:17*

By Martin Schweikert

The majority of translations (to be exact: 51), including the major, well-established ones, render Ps 22:16 (in some editions v. 17, in some editions Ps 22) as follows:

“For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have inclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet.” (*King James Version* family)

However, for a smaller number of versions (32, to be precise), the situation is quite different. They fall into three groups, the first of which has 4 members and is represented by *Leeser Old Testament*:

“For dogs have encompassed me; the assembly of the wicked have enclosed me: **like lions they threaten my hands and my feet.**”

Suddenly, there are **several lions**.

The second group of 8 translations offers something like

“Yes, wild dogs surround me – a gang of evil men crowd around me; **like a lion they pin my hands and feet.**” (*New English Translation*)

Note that there is only one lion.

Finally, the third group has 14 members. It is represented by *EasyEnglish Bible*:

“They are ready to attack me, like a group of wild dogs. **They tear apart my hands and my feet.**”

There is no lion here. The various forms of abuse suffered by the hands and feet are usually attributed to the dogs.

How, then, are we to make sense of this confusion – several lions, one lion, no lion at all, hands and feet are bitten (ICB, EXB), bound (NRSVUE), gouged (ISV), gnawed at (OEB), hacked off (NJB), pinned down (MSG2002), smashed (TFT), tied (JB), torn at (CEV, GNT, TEV), torn apart (EEB), or they have shriveled (NRSV).

To complete the confusion, let us also quote *Stern Complete Jewish Bible*, another representative of the second group:

“Dogs are all around me, a pack of villains closes in on me **like a lion my hands and feet.**”

No matter how often one reads it – it simply makes no sense.

We are, of course, accustomed to a fair amount of translational licence – particularly in paraphrased translations such as *The Message*. But how can it be that one and the same source text is translated in such different ways?

The answer is as astonishing as it is simple: it is **not** the same source text. The question is not “**How** to translate?”, but “**What** to translate?”

To comprehend this issue, it is essential to understand the process by which the original text of the Hebrew Old Testament has been transmitted over time. In contrast to the numerous manuscripts and fragments from which the text of the Greek New Testament can be reconstructed, the Old Testament is based largely on what is known as the “Masoretic Text”. The Masoretes (from the Hebrew “Masorah”, meaning “tradition”) were Jewish scholars who were active between approximately 600 and 1000 AD. The biblical text was reproduced with the utmost reliability, and – given that Hebrew was originally written without vowels – vowel and stress marks, as well as marginal notes, were added. This resulted in a text which was clearly defined in terms of how it should be read. Today, this text forms the basis of the critical edition of the Hebrew Bible, known as the “Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia”.

This text has been meticulously preserved in its original form in a manuscript dating back to 1008 AD, known as the “Codex Leningradensis”. The text is, naturally, much older; it most likely originates from pre-Christian times. The discovery of the Qumran manuscripts in 1947 was met with great astonishment. It is evident that these manuscripts are over 1,000 years older than the “Codex Leningradensis”, yet they correspond remarkably well with it. The differences are typically confined to spelling and word order, with only minor variations present. This is regarded as irrefutable evidence of the precise transmission of the Masoretic Text.

In the Masoretic Text, the second half of Ps 22:17 is written as follows: כָּאֲרִי יָדַי וְרַגְלֵי *ka-ariy yaday w:rag:lay*. If the phrase is translated literally, the meaning is: “Like a lion my hands and my feet”. This makes no sense whatsoever.

Only *Stern Complete Jewish Bible* translates the Masoretic Text literally, but this makes just as little sense in English as it does in Hebrew. The other 31 translations mentioned at the outset, however, try to find some meaning in it by omitting or inventing things, adding whatever seems appropriate to shed light on the matter. They seem unconcerned by the fact that, in doing so, they sometimes stretch the Masoretic Text to breaking point.

Rather than subjecting the Masoretic Text to such treatment, it would be far more reasonable to assume that this is one of those extremely rare instances in which the text is flawed and does not contain the original wording.

Let us look at the fourth consonant of the first word, the ך *yod*, which looks very similar to a ן *waw*. The two characters are almost identical; the only difference is that the stroke on the ן *waw* is longer than that on the ך *yod*. With the repeated manual copying of the text from an original, it is easy to see how the corrupted version came about.

We can safely leave the vowel marks aside for the time being – after all, they were only introduced by the Masoretes. The actual significant difference between the two words lies in the length of the stroke of the final consonant.

If one now moves the vowel sign “ . ” (“i”) from beneath the ך to the middle of the following ן one obtains כְּאַרוּ *ka-aru* which is formed from the root כרה *krh* “to dig” and thus means “they have dug”. Thus, if one bears in mind the poetic nature of the language and does not slavishly adopt the word’s meaning from the dictionary, one arrives at the version which – as mentioned at the outset – is offered by the majority of translations: “They have pierced my hands and feet.”

This solution is by no means a mere figment of the imagination. The “Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia” notes that there are “few” Hebrew manuscripts which read כְּאַרוּ *ka-aru*. Furthermore, the Qumran manuscript 5/6Hev 40 (also known as 5/6HevPs, c. 50– 115 AD) reads כארו, which is interpreted as “probably pierced”.

Furthermore, there are ancient translations of the Hebrew texts. The best known is the Greek “Septuagint” from the 3rd–2nd century BC. This has – without any mention of lions – ὄρυξαν χεῖράς μου καὶ πόδας *ōryxan cheiras mou kai podas* from “to dig up, to excavate”, meaning once again “they have dug through / pierced my hands and feet”. The Syrian Peshitta also translates in this sense.

Either these translations were based on a Hebrew source containing כְּאַרוּ *ka-aru*, or the translators drew the same conclusions as above.

In any case, “they have pierced my hands and feet” is a legitimate translation, even though the Masoretic Text reads slightly differently.