

Psalm 36

Translation & Commentary

by James Jordan

a For the Director.

b By the Servant of Yahweh.

c By David.

d An Oracle.

1 The transgression of the wicked person is my meditation:

2 There is no fear of God before his eyes.

3 For he flatters himself in his own eyes,

4 Hating to detect his liability.

A 5 The words of his mouth are trouble and deceitful.

6 He has ceased to be wise, to do good.

7 Trouble he plots on his bed.

8 He commits himself to a course not good;

9 Evil he does not reject.

10 Yahweh, in the heavens is Your lovingkindness,

11 Your faithfulness is up to the high clouds.

B 12 Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains.

13 Your justice like the great deep.

14 Both man and cattle You preserve, Yahweh.

15 How priceless is Your lovingkindness, O God!

16 And the sons of man in the shadow of Your wings find refuge.

17 They feast on the abundance of Your house,

C 18 And the river of Your delights You give them to drink,

19 For with You is the fountain of life.

20 In Your light we see light.

B' 21 Continue Your lovingkindness to those who know You,

22 And Your righteousness to the upright in heart.

23 May the foot of the proud not come against me.

24 And let not the hand of wicked persons drive me away.

A' 25 Behold how they lie fallen, the troublemakers!

26 Thrown down, unable to rise!

Commentary

Psalm 36 begins with several translation problems. First, the first word in the actual psalm, as it is found in the English text, is the word “oracle.” This word also begins the second verse in the medieval Massoretic Hebrew text, which is our basic Hebrew text. (The first Hebrew verse is the “heading” in English versions.) The result is that translators and commentators have been put in a position of trying to integrate “oracle” into the first line of the psalm: “What transgression oracles/says to the wicked is deep in my heart” or some such. I think



Theopolis™
INSTITUTE

BIBLE • LITURGY • CULTURE

Psalm 36

Translation & Commentary

by James Jordan

it far simpler to take the word “oracle” and make it part of the heading, as a description of what kind of psalm this psalm is, which is how the word “oracle” is used regularly in the rest of the Bible.

Line 1 also has another problem. The Hebrew writes, “The transgression of the wicked person is in the deep/midst of my heart,” implying that David is meditating on this phenomenon. Some ancient versions, and evidently a few Hebrew manuscripts also, say “in the deep/midst of his heart,” which means that the transgression of the wicked is a deep and serious matter. Either translation works. I’ve chosen to keep with the majority of Hebrew manuscripts, but the future may change this decision. Fifteen thousand years from now we may be better able to decide this.

Finally, line 4 in Hebrew literally reads “to detect his liability to hate.” That’s all it says. So translators fill in. Some say, “He flatters himself . . . too much to detect his liability and to hate it.” The words in italics have to be added and are not in the Hebrew. Others render it, “He flatters himself . . . that his liability cannot be detected and hated.” I have chosen a simpler approach, which is to take the last word in the sentence (“to hate”) as the governing Hebrew verb form, and render it (as is entirely possible) as gerund (“hating”): “He flatters himself in his own eyes, to detect his liability hating,” which is too obscure in English, hence: “hating to detect his liability.” This is what we see all the time: Sinners hate to have their liabilities detected and exposed, and they certainly don’t do it themselves by any self-examination. The fear of God (ln. 2) would cause them to examine themselves, but being fools (Ps. 14:1, no fear of God), they reassure themselves that they have done no wrong and have incurred no liability to judgment.

The psalm has five sections. The outer two sections deal with the wicked person(s) who cause trouble. Troublemaking is serious business, as anyone who has ever been a pastor or leader or king or supervisor can tell you. The troublemaker puts roadblocks and stumbling blocks in the way of the leader trying to bring God’s kingdom into greater manifestation. Lines 8 & 9 nicely bring this out by putting the words “good” and “evil” right next to each other in a chiasmic structure: commits to a course : not good :: evil : does not reject.

Note also the bodily language in the two A sections: eyes, mouth, bed, foot, hand. The troublemaker is not just some gnostic apparition, but is a real person using all his powers against God and against His representative, David -- and you and me.

The three central sections focus on lovingkindness, with righteousness added in the two B sections. Really, B, C, and B’ could just be three B sections, but the central section is sacramental in a way that the two B sections are not: In C we find food and drink and light.

B’ simply asks God to continue His blessings listed in B and C. In B (lns. 10-13) we move from the heights (“in the heavens”) down through the high flat cirrus clouds (which is what the specific word for clouds here means) to the tops of the mighty mountains and then down to the depths of the deep. God’s love and steadfastness occupy the whole extent of creation, for the benefit of both Adamic man and cattle (ln. 14).



Theopolis™
INSTITUTE

BIBLE • LITURGY • CULTURE