

NOTE

THE ROOT GMR IN THE PSALMS

The dictionaries of Gesenius-Buhl and Brown-Driver-Briggs correctly maintain that *gml* and *gmr* are cognate roots. Originally *gml* probably meant "complete, accomplish," whereas *gmr* basically signified "complete, come to an end." The relationship between these two roots is still evident in Arabic where *jamala* and *jammara* both denote "collect, assemble." In Hebrew, *gml* developed a number of nuances, prominent among which are "deal fully with, recompense (in both senses, i.e., reward and punish)," but *gmr* is treated by the lexica and the commentaries as though it invariably meant "complete, come to an end." The fact, however, that the original, basic meaning of *gmr* does not fit its context in three of the five passages in which it occurs in the Psalter, raises the question whether this root also has not undergone a semantic development similar to *gml*.

For example, Ps. 7:10: *yigmor-nā' ra' r^ošā'im* is invariably translated, "let the evil of the wicked come to an end." This is a praiseworthy sentiment, but one which is quite foreign to the tenor and spirit of the Psalm, which is found in such pleas as: "arise, O Lord, in your anger; lift up yourself in wrath against my foes (v. 7)," and in the confident desire set forth at some length in vv. 16-17 that the mischief and treachery of his enemy would receive just retribution. Gunkel rightly summarizes the content of the Psalm when he states that the basic theme which unifies the entire Psalm is that the poet, sorely maligned by an enemy, avers his own innocence, desires his own salvation, and wishes for the ruin of his enemy.¹ Rather we should omit the *yôd* in *yigmor*, the result of dittography since the preceding word ended with a *yôd*, and read *g^omor-nā' ra' r^ošā'im ūkōnēn šaddiq*: "Avenge the evil of the wicked and reassure the just man."² Such a translation not only coincides with the notion of vengeance expressed in vv. 5-7, but also finds confirmation in many texts of the Psalter. Thus Ps. 28:4: "Render to them according to their work, and according to their evil deeds. According to the work of their hands render to them; pay back to them what they have done." This particular semantic development is also found in the root *šlm*, related in meaning to both *gmr* and *gml*. In the Qal this root means "be complete, sound," whereas in the Pi'el it denotes "make whole, revenge, recompense." The development occurs in Phoenician and Old Aramaic in

¹ *Die Psalmen* (Göttinger Handkommentar zum Alten Testament; 1926), p. 25.

² Brown-Driver-Briggs, p. 466, recognized that *škōnēn*, which stands in parallelism with *g^omor-nā'*, must mean "vindicate and make secure to righteous."

addition to Hebrew. This particular parallel might rouse the suspicion that only the Pi'el of *gmr* could carry the meaning "avenge." However, from the fact that in Syriac both the Pe'al and Pa'el of *gmr* express the meaning "complete, finish," it is clear that this last conclusion is not required by the evidence.³

Arguing from such texts as the Taanach letter, Gen. 14:20, and Isa. 59:18 ff., H. S. Nyberg has concluded that the god 'Eli, whom he has discovered in these passages, was a god of vengeance, "ein Rächegott."⁴ This discovery, if correct, proves to be very serviceable when applied to the second colon of Ps. 57:3, where we should vocalize *lā'el gōmēr 'ēli*, "to the avenging God 'Eli (Most Exalted One)." Since by the third-second century B.C. the ancient divine name 'Eli had long been lost to sight, the translators of the LXX were helpless when confronted with the Hebrew *Vorlage*; hence they elected to read *gōmēl 'ālāy*, a perfectly good construction. This is also the escape used by the majority of modern commentators on the Psalms. On the other hand, St. Jerome's translation of the Psalter from Hebrew preserves a very instructive reading, which should give one pause before emending the Masoretic text: *Invocabo Deum altissimum, Deum ultorem meum*, "I shall invoke God the most high, God my avenger." Jerome sensed that the context demanded the translation *ultorem*, "avenger," because in the next verse the Psalmist states: "He will send forth from the heavens and save me; he will put to shame him who tramples on me." The commentators are content to assert that Jerome's rendering, *ultorem*, reflects an original *gōmēl*, but they fail to mention that, if this were the case, it would be the only instance in which he so translated the root *gml*. Jerome generally translates *gml* by *reddere, tribuere, retribuere*, but never by *ulcisci* and its derivatives.

In Ps. 138:8 it is the LXX and its daughters which have preserved the true meaning of the phrase *yahwēh yigmōr ba'ādī*, which they render *kurios antapodōsei uper emou*, "the Lord will requite on my behalf." Briggs main-

³ In the Hadad Inscription from Zenjirli (line 30), *lgmrw* will offer less difficulty if understood as "avenge, vindicate." "May you, his brethren, vindicate his memory" would be a plausible translation, but since the entire context is so obscure, this translation is put forth merely as a suggestion. See G. A. Cooke, *A Text-Book of North-Semitic Inscriptions*, p. 171. In Ugaritic the root *gmr* appears several times. In one text (49:VI:16) *gmrm* seem to be animals that are capable of fighting ferociously (so Gordon, *Ugaritic Handbook* [1947], p. 221), and in text 137:46 *gmr Hd* stands in parallelism with *īpt nhr*, "Judge River." This balancing of epithets would make "Vindicator Hadd" a very defensible translation of *gmr hd*. The precise connection between *gmr*, "vindicate," and *gōmer*, the wife of Hosea, is not clear.

⁴ *Studien zum Hoseabuche* (Uppsala, 1935), pp. 59-60. See also the present writer's "The Divine Name 'Eli in the Psalms," THEOLOGICAL STUDIES, XIV (1953), 452-57.

tains that here, as well as at 57:3, the translators seem to have read an original *gml*, but this explanation does not appear to be very convincing, at least for this passage, because it is quite clear that Jerome's Hebrew text had *gmr*, which is reflected by his *Dominus operabitur pro me*, "the Lord will work on my behalf."⁵ The Jewish translators probably arrived at the correct sense of the text by noting that the preceding verse stated: "against the wrath of my enemies you send forth your hand, and your right hand saves me." Obviously Yahweh is interposing in behalf of the Psalmist and is acting as his avenger. The context here, it should be noted, is strikingly akin to that of 57:3, where, immediately after saying that he will call upon the avenging God 'Eli, the Psalmist adds: "He will send forth from heaven and he will save me; he will put to shame him who tramples on me."

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⁵ *The Book of Psalms* (The International Critical Commentary; New York, 1907), II, 491.