

Analysis of Romans 3:4 & Ps. 51:4: “Judge” or “Judged”

Introduction

In Romans 3:4, Paul is quoting from Psalm 51:4, but Paul uses the word “judged,” whereas in Psalm 51:4 the word is “judge.” Which is correct, and why? The aim of this analysis, therefore, is to try to find the answer to this question.

Exegesis

Against Thee, Thee only, I have sinned, and done what is evil in Thy sight, so that Thou art justified when Thou dost speak, and blameless when Thou dost *judge*” (Psalm 51:4).

May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written, ‘That Thou mightest be justified in Thy words, and mightest prevail when Thou art *judged*’ (Romans 3:4).

Obviously, there is a difference between the verse in Psalms and its reference in Romans by Paul. The question, therefore, is why is there a difference in voice (i.e., from active voice in Psalms, versus passive voice in Romans)?

In the Hebrew, the word for “judge” is בְּשִׁפְטֶךָ (*bÉ_opht,ek_*), which is a qal infinitive construct, with a 2nd person singular pronominal suffix. A more literal reading would be: “in your judging.” Thus, the English translation of the Hebrew is correct in the active voice.

In the Greek, the word for “judged” is κρίνεσθαί (*krinesthai*), and it is a present passive infinitive. The entire phrase is, ἐν τῷ κρίνεσθαί σε (*en t_*krinesthai se*), and, syntactically, it is similar to the Hebrew construction of Psalm 54:4, with the exception that the infinitive is in the passive voice in the Greek and the active in the Hebrew. But, unlike the Greek, which has both active and passive infinitives, the Hebrew only has one voice, and that is determined by the verb root. If, for example, the root in Hebrew in this instance was a Niphal, Pual or Hophal, then the infinitive would have been in the passive voice (the Niphal has both an active and passive meaning). However, it was in the Qal, which only has an active meaning in the infinitive (a Qal participle can be either active or passive). In addition, when an infinitive is used verbally, even though it is not a finite verb form (i.e., it doesn’t have person and number performing the action), its subject will be in the accusative case, and that is the situation here where σε (*se*) functions as the subject of the infinitive. The combination of the preposition ἐν (*en*) and the definite article τῷ (*t_()*) help to form a type of temporal clause with the infinitive that indicates a contemporaneous time with the action indicated by the verb in the infinitive. Thus, “when You are judged”; that is, that you will simultaneously “prevail when You are judged.”

The problem, however, is that we have the one truth presented in somewhat two different perspectives in the Hebrew text versus the Koine text. In Psalm 51:4, David is

talking about his own sin and failure, and how he has now come to see that God’s Word is absolutely correct when God describes the horror, evil and destruction of sin and pronounces His judgment against it. This is no longer theoretical with David, but he has come to see the absolute truth of God’s Word regarding his failure and the personal horror he has experienced as a result of it.

In Romans 3:4, Paul is presenting the fact that regardless of the Jews failure to believe and walk in the promises of God’s Word, that does not, in ANY WAY, “nullify the faithfulness of God . . .” (Romans 3:3). Then Paul quotes Psalm 51:4 as a support for God when His “Words” and ways are judged to be unfair and wrong by others. As we look at Romans 3:4 in comparison to Psalm 51:4, we find direct parallels, but also some slight changes.

The beginning statement of each is almost identical:

- 1) “Thou art justified when Thou dost speak, . . .” (Psalm 51:4)

תִּפְדָּא בְּדֹבְרֶךָ (tifdaq b@dobrek_)

In this statement, the psalmist is stating, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that the Lord is “justified/righteous whenever You speak”; i.e., whenever and whatever God says in His Word is true and altogether righteous, versus our own perverted, flawed and skewed sense of self-righteousness, which leads us into self-destruction, not life and peace.

- 2) “That Thou mightest be justified in Thy words, . . .” (Romans 3:4).

ὅπως ἂν δικαιωθῆς ἐν τοῖς λόγοις σου

What we have is “in your words,” versus “when you speak.” However, what we notice is that this quote of Psalm 51:4 by Paul is taken directly, word for word, from the LXX: “ὅπως ἂν δικαιωθῆς ἐν τοῖς λόγοις σου, . . .” Is there an explanation for this difference between the Hebrew text and the Greek LXX? Yes, there is, and it based on the fact that when the translators of the LXX were doing their translation, they did not have a Hebrew text with vowel points. Thus, תִּפְדָּא בְּדֹבְרֶךָ (b@dobrek_) without any pointing looks like בְּדַבְרֶךָ, which could easily be interpreted as being “in your words.” The reason for this is that “in your words” in a pointed Hebrew text would appear as בְּדִבְרֶיךָ (bidb_reyk_), and if the ם elides, then you have בְּדִבְרֶךָ (bidb_rek_), “in your words,” which is the translation of the LXX and the Koine text.

On the other hand, the second half of the verses are altogether different from each other in the Hebrew, versus the LXX and the Koine:

- 1) “And mightest prevail when Thou art judged” (Romans 3:4).

καὶ νικήσῃς ἐν τῷ κρίνεσθαί σε (kai nik_seis en t_/krinesthai se)

Here too, this is taken word for word from the LXX. The word “prevail,” in this context with the word “judge,” means to “win the verdict” in a type of trial, and in this instance it is clear that Paul is applying this verse to the trial concerning the righteousness and fairness of what God has done and is doing with regard to the unbelief of the Jews and His judgment against that unbelief. In other

words, the charges and criticism brought against God because of the way and manner He has dealt with the unbelief of the Jews will ultimately be demonstrated to be completely baseless and misguided because of an utter lack of understanding His holiness and the corruption of man.

- 2) “And blameless when Thou dost judge” (Psalm 51:4).

תִּזְכֶּה בְּשִׁפְטֶיךָ (tizkeh b'op%oek_)

In this same passage in Psalms, however, David is talking about his own sin and failure, and He is making it abundantly clear that God is absolutely correct and righteous in His judgment against that sin because of its innate evil and destruction that he now fully understands, with the result that he is coming broken before God, appealing to His mercy and grace alone. This is one of the most beautiful Psalms in the Bible because it accurately presents God’s judgment and mercy in the face of our sin and failures and the true essence and direction that genuine repentance and brokenness over our sin should take.

In addition, the Targum doesn’t offer any help in this passage as far as a similar translation to the LXX, but it does provide some possible insight as to why the difference between the Hebrew text and the LXX. The Targumim is an interpolation; that is, it is a translation that has interspersed throughout the interpretive analyses of its rabbinic translators. Can this also be said of the LXX? At times the LXX is word for word with the Hebrew text, and other times it varies, as in this instance with Psalm 51:4. Some have suggested that is due to the LXX translators having access to another Hebrew textual family. That is possible, but, in keeping with the rabbinic tradition and approach toward the translation of the Targumim, is it possible that what we have in the LXX is also an interpolation from time to time? We certainly see the same thing in our own modern translations, such as the Living Bible, which is a paraphrase, and the New International Version, which employed the dynamic equivalence approach toward its translation.

Therefore, in taking all of the above into consideration, I adduce that the LXX translators were quite likely applying to Psalm 51:4 their own spiritual and cultural understanding of what the Hebrew text was saying. Thus, in the case of David, as well as all the rest of us who sin and fail, God’s judgment against our sin is absolutely correct and righteous, and when any of us as humans criticize or bring into question those judgments, God will ALWAYS win the adjudication because He is the source of ALL TRUTH, and “The judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether” (Psalm 19:9).