

God's Name and God's Word in Psa 138:2

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MT: אֶשְׁתַּחֲוֶה אֶל־הַיְכָל קִדְשֶׁךָ וְאֹדָה אֶת־שִׁמְךָ עַל־תְּסִדְדֶךָ וְעַל־אֲמַתְךָ כִּי־הִגְדַּלְתָּ עַל־כָּל־שִׁמְךָ אֲמַרְתָּ:

KJV: I will worship toward thy holy temple, and praise thy name for thy lovingkindness and for thy truth: **for thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name.**

Summary

The last clause of the verse seems to demean God's name, which elsewhere in Scripture is always treated with the greatest respect. This memo

- emphasizes the difficulty of the text by noting how various versions translate it
- points out that the clause does not use the common comparative construction,
- reviews the use of the construction that is used, and
- suggests an alternative translation based on the immediate context that removes the difficulty.

Difficulty of the text

The exalted status given to God's name throughout the OT gives us pause with the KJV's translation of the second half of the verse. How can any single aspect of God, such as his word, be higher than "all thy name," his complete revealed character? The sense of awkwardness to which this tension leads is revealed in how various translators have handled the text.

Some modern versions (ESV, RSV) ignore the accents. The repeated *maqeph* (the dash) in על-כל-שמך "over all thy name" indicates that the entire phrase is to be taken as a single accentual unit, which is the complement of הגדלת "thou has magnified." By ignoring the accents, one can restrict the complement to על-כל "over all," a construction that is found with the *Piel* of גדל in Dan 11:37 "for he shall magnify himself above all." Then the meaning would be (ESV) "you have exalted above all things your name and your word." This solution goes back to the Vulgate, which drops "thy word" and translates "magnificasti super omne nomen sanctum tuum" "thou has exalted above all thy holy name." This solution is also adopted in the two major precursors of the KJV, the Geneva Bible ("for thou hast magnified thy Name aboue all things by thy word") and the Bishop's Bible ("For thou hast magnified thy name: and thy worde aboue all thinges"). It is remarkable that the KJV changed the wording, given the agreement between its precursors. The KJV was largely motivated by tension between the adherents of these two existing versions: the Geneva Bible was favored by the reform-minded puritans and the Bishop's Bible by the high church. The first of the fifteen rules given to the translators was, "The ordinary Bible read in the Church, commonly called the Bishops Bible, to be followed, and as little altered as the Truth of the original will permit." In this context, a change that deviates from both of the antecedents must be seen as highly compelling in the minds of the translators.

The LXX tradition offers various solutions. Some manuscripts ignore the accentuation and also replace λογιον, the natural translation of "thy word," with αγιον "holy," recovering "thou hast exalted thy holy name above everything." This is the reading followed by Brenton's English translation of the LXX

(Bibleworks LXE). Grabe's edition, followed by Rahlfs and thus appearing in Bibleworks' BGT, removes the reference to God's name, and thus the tension, by dropping the pronominal suffix on שם, yielding "you have exalted your word above every name."

The NET Bible emends שמך "thy name" to שמיך "thy heavens," again removing God's name from the comparison. Clines' Dictionary of Classical Hebrew takes a similar approach. It assumes that the present text is the result of haplography from an original על כל שמיך שמך, reconstructing the sense, "thou hast exalted thy name and thy word above all thy heavens."

The Targum of Psalms, an ancient Aramaic translation used widely in the Jewish diaspora, amplifies "thy word" to מימרי תושבחהך "the word of your splendor," effectively shifting the focus from God's word to his glory as something that can exceed his name.

The Expression is Not Comparative

The common rendering of the clause gives it a comparative sense. The verb "magnify" is the *Hiphil* form of the verbal root גדל "to be big." The *Hiphil* has a causitive sense, so the verb means to "make big, exalt, magnify," and most readers would find little semantic difference between the KJV's "magnify thy word above all thy name" and "make thy word bigger than all thy name." Hebrew does have a comparative construction that would mean just this, using גדל with the preposition מן. This construction appears with both the *Qal* and *Piel* of גדל (though not the *Hiphil*).¹

Qal examples:

Gen 41:40 only in the throne will I be **greater גדל than מן** thou.

Gen 48:19 but truly his younger brother shall be **greater than** he,

1Ki 10:23 So king Solomon **exceeded מן** all the kings of the earth for riches and for wisdom.

2Ch 9:22 And king Solomon **passed מן** all the kings of the earth in riches and wisdom.

Lam 4:6 For the punishment of the iniquity of the daughter of my people is **greater than** the punishment of the sin of Sodom,

Mal 1:5 And your eyes shall see, and ye shall say, The LORD will be **magnified from** [beyond] the border of Israel.

Piel examples:

1Ki 1:37 As the LORD hath been with my lord the king, even so be he with Solomon, and **make** his throne **greater than** the throne of my lord king David.

1Ki 1:47 God make the name of Solomon better than thy name, and **make** his throne **greater than** thy throne.

If David had meant to say that God is making his word greater than his name, he almost certainly would have used גדל מן.

¹ Once, in Job 31:18, the preposition is used without this comparative sense, to indicate the starting time of an action: "from my youth he was **brought up** with me, as *with* a father, and I have guided her from my mother's womb"

Other Uses of the Construction David Used

The expression in Psa 138:2 is not גדל מן, but גדל על. This expression (mostly with גדל in the *Hiphil*, but sometimes in the *Hithpael* and once in the *Qal*) commonly expresses, not comparison, but outright opposition.

Hiphil examples:

Job 19:5 If indeed ye will **magnify גדל yourselves against על** me,

Psa 35:26 let them be clothed with shame and dishonour that **magnify themselves against** me.

Psa 38:16 when my foot slippeth, they **magnify themselves against** me.

Psa 55:12 For *it was* not an enemy *that* reproached me; then I could have borne *it*: neither *was it* he that hated me *that* did **magnify himself against** me; then I would have hid myself from him:

Jer 48:26 Make ye him drunken: for he **magnified himself against** the LORD:

Jer 48:42 And Moab shall be destroyed from *being* a people, because he hath **magnified himself against** the LORD.

Eze 35:13 Thus with your mouth ye have **boasted against** me,

Zep 2:8 I have heard the reproach of Moab, and the revilings of the children of Ammon, whereby they have reproached my people, and **magnified themselves against** their border.

Zep 2:10 This shall they have for their pride, because they have reproached and **magnified themselves against** the people of the LORD of hosts.

Hithpael examples:

Isa 10:15 shall the saw **magnify itself against** him that shaketh it?

Dan 11:36 And the king shall do according to his will; and he shall exalt himself, and **magnify himself** above every god,

Dan 11:37 Neither shall he regard the God of his fathers, nor the desire of women, nor regard any god: for he shall **magnify himself above** all.

Qal example: Zec 12:7 The LORD also shall save the tents of Judah first, that the glory of the house of David and the glory of the inhabitants of Jerusalem do not **magnify themselves against** Judah.

In all of these examples, גדל takes only a single complement, the prepositional phrase governed by על. The general sense (made explicit with the *Hithpael*) is that the subject of the verb is in competition with and opposition to the object of the preposition. The construction in Psa 138:2, with a direct object as well as the prepositional phrase, appears elsewhere only once,

Psa 41:9 Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath **lifted up his heel against me**

Again, the sense is not comparison, but opposition. If David is using גדל על in this sense in Psa 138:2, he is saying that the Lord is attacking his own name with his word, which seems very unlikely. More probably, we should recognize the usual idiom for opposition as involving the prepositional phrase but no direct object, and see the single instance in Psa 41:9, not as an idiom with fixed conventional

meaning, but as an expression constructed dynamically in that particular context.

Use of על in the context

An oppositional interpretation is awkward in Psa 138:2b because in Psa 138:2a, David himself is praising the Lord's name, and the second half of the verse explains why he is praising the Lord's name: "I will praise thy name ... For thou hast magnified thy word על כל שמך." He certainly would not be motivated to praise God's name if God himself were attacking it.

Let's look more closely at the first half of the verse:

וְאֹדְתָה אֶת־שִׁמְךָ עַל־חַסְדֶּךָ וְעַל־אֱמֻנָתְךָ

I will praise thy name **because of על thy lovingkindness and because of על thy truth,**

David relates his praise for the name of God to God's lovingkindness and God's truth, and he does so using the same preposition, על, that expresses how God relates his name to his word. There is an additional link between the two halves of the verse: God's word is the means by which he expresses his lovingkindness and his truth. In the first half, the preposition has the sense "concerning, because of," as it often does elsewhere (senses 2, 3, 4 in HALOT). The same basic meaning lies behind the oppositional sense: an adversary magnifies himself "with respect to" another person. The parallel between the two halves is strengthened if we take the preposition in the same sense in the second half.

In the first half, David has experienced God's lovingkindness and his truth. Because of this, he directs his praise toward God's name. Why should he praise God's name, rather than directly lauding God's lovingkindness and truth? The second half answers this question: it is God's character, expressed in his name, that motivates him to magnify his word, to see to it that what he promises, he performs. This dynamic is what produces the lovingkindness and truth mentioned in the first half of the verse.

This reading effectively reverses the conventional reading. David is not saying that God's word is greater than his name, much less that it is in opposition to his name. Rather, God's name is the underlying motive for his word, the reputation that he must uphold and for the sake of which he exhibits his lovingkindness and truthfulness. The name is the great and central thing, and his truthful word, as important as it is, is a consequence of the even greater importance of God's name.

I would suggest a translation along these lines:

I will praise thy name
because of thy lovingkindness
and because of thy truth,
For thou hast magnified thy word
because of all thy name.