HORN?

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Category: Bible Translation

We had a congregational reading of Psalm 148 this morning. The text was displayed on the screen and we all read along. It was good stuff, very inspiring.

> *1 Praise the LORD.*
> *Praise the LORD from the heavens,*
> *praise him in the heights above.*
>
> *2 Praise him, all his angels,*
> *praise him, all his heavenly hosts.*
>
> *3 Praise him, sun and moon,*
> *praise him, all you shining stars.*

It was all going very well... until we came to the last verse:

> *14 He has raised up for his people a horn,*
> *the praise of all his saints,*
> *of Israel, the people close to his heart.*
> *Praise the LORD.*

He has raised up for his people a horn? What on earth does that mean? I looked the passage up in the pew Bible, and the NIV has this slightly helpful note:

> *Horn here symbolizes strong one, that is, king.*

Unfortunately, we were reading from the screen, where no footnote was available, and I'm sure that I'm not the only one who was confused by the reading. But it gets more complex, the New Living Translation translates this verse as following:

> *14 He has made his people strong,*
> *honoring his faithful onesâ€"*
> *the people of Israel who are close to him.*

While the Contemporary English Version goes for:

> *14Like a bull with mighty horns,*
> *the LORD protects*
> *his faithful nation Israel,*
> *because they belong to him.*

> *Shout praises to the LORD!*

So, the NIV says that *horn* symbolizes a king, but only puts that information in a footnote. The NLT believes that it means strength and includes it in the translation and the CEV believes that it is symbolizing the strength of a bull. What's more, in the NLT, it is God who is strong, while in the CEV it is God's people who are strong. It's all very confusing and I'm not sure which approach is the best to translating this verse. When the meaning of an image is clear, I'd like people to be able to understand it, so I generally prefer the approach of the NLT and CEV to this verse. But the truth is that we can't be entirely sure what the verse means, so perhaps the NIV has done better in leaving the image intact and allowing us to interpate it ourselves, though they might have offered other alternatives in the footnote. Sometimes translation is far more of an art than a science.

Lingamish blogged on this theme a while back and you may be interested to read what he wrote.