

TRANSLATION AND LITERARY STYLE

APPRECIATING BIBLICAL LITERATURE

by David W. Baker*

Poetry, more than prose, uses various aspects of the literary craft to enhance its meaning and impact. In it, through a selection of literary devices, the medium becomes a significant part of the message. Since poetry is intended to attract the senses and to stir the emotions, it goes beyond the cognitive and propositional to the realm of feeling; it must move from intellect to imagination.

A discussion of English poetry would elicit numerous elements distinguishing it from prose. These would include rhyme and rhythm, alliteration, assonance and various kinds of imagery. Similar devices characterize other languages, including Hebrew, and specifically that of the Bible. Unfortunately, it is at this very level of literary appreciation where translation causes problems. This is so because the majority of devices are formal, dealing with a word's shape or sound, rather than semantic, dealing with its meaning. Rare is the word in the target language that has the same form as a word with the same meaning in the source language.

In describing a battle between Canaan and Israel we can hear that "loud beat the horses' hoofs with the *galloping, galloping* of his steeds" (Judges 5:22; RSV). It is fortuitous that English describes this action by the onomatopoeic "galloping" while Hebrew uses *daharot*, both having the same rhythm.

There are a vast number of such examples, but unfortunately a limitation to an English translation deprives us of a real appreciation of most, unless the translation, or at least its final stylistic shaping, is done by one who is himself a poet. In this case we generally do not have a mirror of the Hebrew original, but rather a new creation based on concepts provided by the Hebrew.

Among the numerous subtleties which are lost to us are the alliteration of the three sibilants which could only inadequately be rendered by "seek the safety of Jerusalem" (Ps. 122:6), as well as the mournful assonance of the sound 'oo' in the lament in Isa. 53:4-6. Numerous word plays, which are often the *raison d'etre* of the particular words chosen by the author, are only made apparent through marginal notes or a commentary and not through the translation itself. For example, in Isaiah 5:7, the good desired by God from his people has become depraved and replaced by its opposite; justice (*mishpat*) has given way to bloodshed (*mishpah*) and righteousness (*tsedaqah*) to a poignant cry of anguish (*tse'aqah*). Even the inversion of two letters can be used to great effect, such as in the remembrance by Esau of the two privileges of which Jacob had deprived him, birthright (*bekorah*) and blessing (*berakah*).

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All of these delights, and more beside, which are based on the physical form or sound of the words, are lost to those who must read only in translation.

While the artist of the Hebrew language did use these and other literary devices in molding his text, most will be aware that these devices are not themselves the backbone of biblical Hebrew poetry. Pride of place is taken here by parallelism. Much English poetry is formed around parallelism or repetition of sound in the use of rhyme, but we have seen that this is usually impossible to preserve in translation. Hebrew parallelism is that of the repetition of ideas rather than of sound. Since it is the content, rather than the form of the words which are used, that bears the parallelism, we are fortunate indeed to be able to preserve this in translation. On this level, at least, we are able to appreciate Hebrew poetry as fully as did the original audience.

The most common form of parallelism is that in which one idea is immediately repeated in different words, for example:

“The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world, and those who dwell therein; for he has founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the rivers” (Ps. 24:1-2).

Another form of parallelism, especially common in wisdom literature, involves antithesis, the contrast of opposite ideas, such as:

“for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish” (Ps. 1:6).

A second element of poetry which is also readily translatable is imagery, since again the meaning and content of the words rather than their form is of preeminent importance. Readers of any language can appreciate the splendor of the praise of God

“who has laid the beams of thy chambers on the waters, who makest the clouds thy chariot, who ridest on the wings of the wind, who makest the winds thy messengers, fire and flame thy ministers” (Ps. 104:3-4).

A final literary device to be noted here is the pun, or a play on the multiple meanings of one word. Most often these are not directly translatable, since the two languages do not share the same range of meaning for the two words involved. There is one deft example of this type of device in Genesis, however, which does come across into English with suitable impact. When describing the respective fates of the steward and the baker who were imprisoned by Pharaoh (Gen. 40), the author explains that both of them had their “head raised” (v. 20; cf. vv. 13, 19). Various commentators have sought to better understand the passage by emending the text in some way, but it can be more effectively read as a macabre pun. In 1 Kings 25:27 (paralleled by Jeremiah 52:31), Jehoiachin’s head is raised, an idiom for his being singled out from among his fellow prisoners and elevated to a special position. Both the steward and the baker are singled out, in accordance with Joseph’s dream. Both were given special treatment, the steward by his idiomatic raising, in which he was

restored to his original position, and the baker, who was literally raised, or at least his head was, when he was decapitated. Thus we can appreciate, even in translation, the subtlety of the word play, which meant a totally different end for the two people involved.

We have seen that literature can be appreciated and experienced even at one remove, through translation. One could liken this, however, to kissing one's beloved through a handkerchief; it is enjoyable, but not nearly as satisfying as real contact. It is good, but it lacks something. In a like manner, our contact with biblical texts could be greatly enhanced if we also would remove the handkerchief and delight directly in the subtleties and delicacies of Hebrew literature. If for no other reason, the benefits of increased aesthetic appreciation should motivate a study of Hebrew.

