

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

*THE REVISED VERSION OF THE OLD TESTA-
MENT.*

A CRITICAL ESTIMATE.

THIRD PAPER.

THE decree of the "Revision Committee of Convocation" elevated the A.V. during the period of the Revisers' labours to the status of an Austrian constitution. No change was to be lawful till two-thirds of the assembly voted for it. Passages were thus discussed not on their own merits, but on the assumption that the A.V. was probably right. To this systematic prejudication we emphatically object. It was an injustice to the Revisers themselves; and a greater injustice to the Hebrew authors. The rights of conservative minorities may deserve recognition in politics, but in questions of scholarship they have no place. Besides, ungracious though it would be to discuss the *personnel* of the Company, were not several members distinguished for proficiency in Arabic, Syriac, or Greek rather than Hebrew? The services of these specialists were required for the very few passages where the issue is not to be determined by Hebrew scholarship alone. Did they vote in all cases? Were they often units in the fraction (a third and one over) which could exercise the functions of a conservative majority? Of course statistics on such points cannot fairly be demanded.

In our opinion pretensions to finality have been tried too often in Bible-translations. They are out of date. We think that the A.V. will in the end rather lose by these attempts to bolster up its prestige, and that several Revisers must regret having consented to work under such conditions. Had the fixed object been to tabulate the worst A.V. mistranslations for some religious body, this kind of conservatism would be less objectionable. But the R.V.

is not a mere index of errors. It became, perhaps despite itself, a new translation. The two-thirds rule will be forgotten, so too the voting powers of the specialists. The public will not understand that in controverted passages the R.V. does *not* represent unbiassed Hebrew scholarship. On the other hand, in course of time intelligent men will require yet another translation, on a very different basis.

What constitutes excellence in translation-work? A happy combination of faithfulness and perspicuity, with as much literary elegance as can be thrown in *gratis*. "Bohn English" may be useful for the purposes of pass-men, but even when tinged with a Jacobean flavouring, it scarcely recommends its subject. In the Revised N.T. elegance was certainly pretermitted; and the neglect was not atoned for in the estimation of the public by gains in faithfulness and perspicuity. Did the O.T. Company take warning by its neighbour's fate? Or is it that O.T. idioms have so far leavened our language that Hebrew lends itself more readily than Greek for translation purposes? Certainly the Revised O.T. is less "rough" than the N.T.; its diction is better balanced, and jars less on an ear habituated to the A.V. It has no pretensions to literary beauty, but it may boast that rhythmical sonorousness, which with somnolent hearers often atones for want of lucid sense. The Revised N.T. could hardly be read in a cathedral service with effect; the O.T. might be.

In point of faithfulness we should award the palm to the N.T. In point of perspicuity the Versions are on a par. We hold it is impossible to reproduce such a terse writer as St. Paul under the thrall of literalism. We are sure that Hebrew thought cannot be done justice to, without constantly expanding, paraphrasing, and eliminating obsolete metaphor. But this was just what our Revisers could not do save in extreme cases.¹ Their aim was to

¹ Yet how hopeless it is to attempt a reproduction of style in translation-

patch up the Version of 1611, not to translate in bold modern English. Now perhaps the truest verdict ever passed on the A.V. was that of John Selden, who lived when it came out, and was not biassed by the unreasoning predilections of our days. He admits the superiority of this Version to its predecessors, and then proceeds:—

“There is no book so translated as the Bible for the purpose. If I translate a French book into English, I turn it into English phrase, not into French-English. *Il fait froid* I say 'tis cold, not it makes cold: but the Bible is rather translated into English words than into English phrase. The Hebraisms are kept, and the phrase of that language is kept. . . . which is well enough so long as scholars have to do with it; but when it comes among the common people, Lord what gear do they make of it.”¹

Much of this “word for word” translation disappears in the R.V., but excess of literalism remains, of course, the connecting link between it and the A.V. It is what no scholar would tolerate in the translation of a Greek or Latin classic; what the translator of Oriental literature outside the Scripture Canon would scrupulously avoid. Literalism has its claims, and we have shown how it should put us *en rapport* with the times and customs brought before us in the original. But this does by no means entail a reproduction of obscure or misleading *idioms*. Let us not confound such literalism with faithfulness. Here, if anywhere, to “follow the letter” is indeed to “miss the spirit.”

I. We will first then cite cases of common Hebrew phrases which cannot be dealt with on principles of servile literalism. One whole class of selections might be made in connexion with such words as “soul” (Hebrew **נפש**) = “desire,” or “life;” rarely the “soul” of our religious

work is shown in the R.V. of Ps. xvii. 7. The original is perspicuous with seven words, the R.V. obscure with twenty-six. Again in Ps. xlix. 14, R.V. has sixteen English words for five Hebrew, and in Ps. lxxix. 11, fifteen for five.

¹ Selden's Table-Talk. *Bible, Scripture.*

idiom); "*heart*" (Hebrew לב = often the seat of "understanding," not of "compassion"); "*bowels*" (=the seat of "compassion"); "*hand*" (used where we should say "strength" or "assistance"); "*eye*" (where we should say "glance"). Thus Ps. xix. 7, "The law of the Lord is perfect, *restoring the soul.*" This is not much more accurate than the A.V. "converting the soul." The fact is there is no direct ethical significance in the words we italicize. They might be applied to a draught of cold water. They mean in modern idiom, "*refreshing the spirit.*"

Gen. ii. 7, "Man became a *living soul.*" This should perhaps rather have been reserved for our list of bad translations. Does the English reader suspect that, so far from the creation of the "soul" being described, the Hebrew words are identically those used of the creation of aquatic and terrestrial animals just before (Gen. i. 20, 24). They are there rendered "*living creature,*" and must be so rendered here. If we are pressed with St. Paul's application of the LXX.'s εἰς ψυχὴν ζῶσαν we reply that the LXX. gives the same translation *in re* the irrational animals of Gen. i. 20, 24.

Ecc. x. 2, "A wise man's *heart* is at his right hand, but a fool's at his left." The seat of understanding is meant. The wise is *intellectually* right-handed, the fool left-handed. Who will gather this from the R.V. translation? On the other hand the R.V. rightly alters the A.V. "heart" to "understanding" in several places, *e.g.* Hos. vii. 11. Jer.

xxxi. 20, "Therefore my *bowels* are troubled for him." The phrase is very unpalatable considering Who is the speaker. Why not render "*My compassion* is stirred on his behalf?" What does it matter to the reader that the ancients located compassion in the "bowels"? The Revised N.T. prepared the way for a clean sweep of this archaic pathology by giving "ye are straitened in your own *affections,*" in 2 Cor. vi. 12. It is a pity the lead

was not followed more consistently throughout the O.T.

“Hand” has been altered to “power” or “strength” in some places, but we have in Job xxi. 16, “Lo, their prosperity is *not in their hand*,” where we would substitute “*not in their own power*.”

Song iv. 9 retains “Thou hast ravished my heart *with one of thine eyes*.” Surely the R.V. should have here given “*with a single glance*,” just as in vii. 8 it rightly renders “the smell of thy *breath* like apples,” instead of repeating the A.V. literalism, “the smell of thy *nose* like apples.” By the way, who uses the noun “*loves*” nowadays in sense of “*caresses*” (Prov. vii. 18)? “*My glory*” is retained where it means my highest faculty, “my soul.” Thus Ps. vii. 5, “Tread my life down to the earth, and lay *my glory* in the dust;” which conveys quite a wrong sense to the English reader. This literalism is repeated in Pss. xvi. 9; xxx. 12; cviii. 1.

To “lift up the hand” indicates in Heb. an asseveration by oath. The R.V. in Ps. cvi. 26, “Therefore he *lifted up his hand* unto them, that he would overthrow them in the wilderness,” is liable to be misunderstood. We must render “Therefore he *sware unto them*,” etc. So also in Num. xiv. 30.

The metaphor which represents religious apostasy as “*fornication*,” might in many cases have been advantageously expunged. We are certain it is often understood literally. In Ps. lxxiii. 27, for instance, we would substitute “Thou hast destroyed all them *that are false to thee*,” for “*that go a whoring from thee*.”

A “*sacrifice*” in Heb. often implies the joyous feast following the religious rite; and thus includes ideas quite strange to the English equivalent. In Prov. xvii. 1 the R.V. rightly gives “Better is a dry morsel and quietness, than a house full of *feasting*” (A.V. “*sacrifices*”). And in Isa. xxix. 1, “Let the *feasts* (A.V. “*sacrifices*”) come round.” But who will see in Prov. vii.

14, "*Sacrifices of peace offerings are with me, this day have I paid my vows,*" that the speaker means she has a house full of good cheer? We may add that שלמים "an offering," has no direct connexion with שלום "peace." We render therefore, "I am keeping a *sacrificial feast*, I have discharged my vows to-day." "Wind," in

Heb., often denotes "moral emptiness," or "inanity." It has no such force in English. What sense will the reader make of "the man walking *in wind* and falsehood," Mic. ii. 11?

The terms "*God*" and "*Jehovah*" are often used in Heb. to qualify substantives with attributes of excellence. Thus the Heb. "*mountains of God*," in Ps. xxxvi. 6, simply means "*great mountains*," as A.V. We regret that the Revisers think fit to amend here in the direction of literalism. They might as reasonably give "a prince of God" instead of "a mighty prince" in Gen. xxiii. 6. The fact is this idiom conveys quite different ideas in English, and must be dropped. The "*garden of the Lord*," Gen. xiii. 10, should be "*a very fertile garden*;" and the "*cedars of God*," Ps. lxxx. 10, were well represented by the A.V.'s "*goodly cedars*." In Ps. lxxviii. 15, the maintenance of this Hebrew idiom is most disastrous. The R.V. gives "*a mountain of God* is the mountain of Bashan." Of course many readers will imagine the highlands of Bashan were peculiarly sacred. But this is exactly what the Psalmist does *not* mean. Bashan had only "*a mighty mountain-range*": it is the lowly Zion which God has chosen for His abode, and its sanctity amply compensates for its inferior height (cf. ver. 16). There is doubtless a "play on words" here, such as we frequently meet with in the Oriental languages, but this cannot be reproduced in translation.

"*To repent oneself*" in Heb. often practically means "to have compassion on others." If we render literally, this sense is obscured to the English reader, e.g. in Ps. cxxxv. 14,

“The Lord shall . . . *repent himself concerning his servants.*” Here and in Ps. xc. 13; Deut. xxxii. 36, we must substitute “*have compassion on.*” “*Weary,*” in the language of the arid East particularly denotes the languor consequent on thirst, and when applied to a land, indicates the effect of drought. In this rainy country, not all will understand the idiom “a *weary land.*” There was no need to alter the A.V.’s “*thirsty land.*” A favourite phrase of Ecclesiastes is rendered in R.V. “Then I *returned and saw*” (iv. 1, 7; ix. 11). This common combination of verbs is simply due to the paucity of adverbs in Hebrew. In English we say “I saw again,” or rather, “*I looked again and saw.*” Similarly in Ps. lxxviii. 41, R.V. gives “They *turned again, and tempted God,*” where the meaning is “*Repeatedly they tempted God.*” “A *deep speech*” is not an English idiom, but in Heb. it means a strange, *unintelligible* language. Why does R.V. retain the literalism, “people of a *deep speech,*” in Isa. xxxiii. 19, while the same words are rendered “people of a *strange speech,*” in Ezek. iii. 5.

II. Literalism has dealt cruelly with the Hebrew prepositions, the “*status constructivus,*” and the possessive pronouns. Isa. liii. 5 still runs, “the chastisement *of* our peace was upon him.” Hebrew-English worded on the assumption that the “*constructive*” is to be represented by our genitive! Of course we must render “The chastisement *tending to* our peace,” etc.

In Prov. viii. 2 we have, “Keep the king’s command, and that in regard of the oath *of* God”; and in 1 Kings ii. 43, “Why then hast thou not kept the oath *of* the Lord.” Why not write in plain English, “the oath made *to* God,” or “*to* the Lord”?

Amos. v. 26, “The star *of* your God which ye made for yourselves.” Here the constructive denotes apposition. We render “your *star-god* which ye made for yourselves.” In Ps. lxix. 9 (quoted in John ii.

17), the Revisers retain the phrase "The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up." Hebrew-English again. The "constructive" here represents not "of" but "*for*." In

Zech. xi. 4, "Feed the flock of the slaughter," common sense demands, "flock *destined for* the slaughter."

In Zech. ix. 12, we have "Turn you [to the stronghold, *ye prisoners of hope*." Unintelligible Hebrew-English, for which we would substitute the periphrasis, "*ye prisoners, who yet cherish hope*."

In Isa. xxvi. 4, literalism reproduces a preposition which has no equivalent in English idiom, "For *in* the Lord Jehovah is an everlasting rock." We might as well render in Ps. lxxviii. 4 (where the same construction occurs), "*In* Jah is his name." The A.V. was better than this, though it lost the figure of the Divine Rock—"For in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength."

But why not keep the figure and drop the preposition? "*In*" is equally superfluous in Ps. lxii. 7, "The rock of my strength, and my refuge is *in* God."

Isa. xxvi. 13, "Other lords beside thee have had the dominion over us, but *by thee* only will we make mention of thy name." If we so take the verse, "by thee" must be paraphrased to give clear sense. Rend. "It is only *through thy help* that we celebrate thy name."

Similarly Ps. lvi. 10, "*In* God will I praise his word," really means "*Through God's help* I will praise his word of promise."

Ps. lvi. 12, "Thy vows are *upon* me O God." The reader has to think twice before he apprehends the meaning, "*Incumbent on me* are the vows made *to thee*, O God."

In Song iii. 10, what is meant by saying that Solomon's palanquin was "paved with love *from* the daughters of Jerusalem"? If "*by*" is intended, why not give "*by*"? The Heb. however may well mean "paved with love *for*," as A.V.

III. Closely connected with this vice of literalism is the obscurity which hangs about so many noble passages. A free rendering or paraphrase was necessary; but the Revisers

dared not attempt it. Thus Isa. i. 13 is left in Cimmerian darkness. "Incense is an abomination unto me; new moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies,—I cannot away with iniquity and the solemn meeting." The A.V. was at least intelligible. We have no idea what the R.V. means. Isaiah intended, we believe, "Incense is an abomination unto me; so too are new-moon and sabbath, and calling of assemblies: iniquity and solemn-assembly I cannot tolerate in conjunction."

Isa. xxxiii. 18. This beautiful description of Israel's relief from recent danger was obscured in the A.V.'s "Thine heart shall *meditate terror*." The R.V. is better, "Thine heart shall *muse on the terror*." But why not add "*of the past*"? Isa. lviii. 13, "If thou . . . call the sabbath a delight, and the *holy* of the Lord honourable." This too is more accurate than the A.V., but why not give what is obviously meant—"the *holy [day]* of the Lord"? Readers may think this "holy" thing is something other than the Sabbath, the temple for instance.

Isa. lxi. 4, "They shall raise up the *former desolations*." No such idiom would be permitted in ordinary literature. The Heb. means "They shall raise up *what has lain in desolation for years past*." Little better is Ps. lxxiv. 3, "Lift up thy feet unto the *perpetual ruins*." "Lift up thy feet unto the *places permanently desolated*" would express the Revisers' interpretation. But does not the Heb. rather mean "*places long desolated*"?

Isa. lxxv. 20. "For the child shall die an hundred years old, and the sinner being an hundred years old shall be accursed." Accurate Hebrew-English again! In any other literature the translator would paraphrase, and save the reader bewilderment. We might render, "For he who dies at a hundred shall be deemed a boy, aye one accursed for sin he who dies at a hundred."

Isa. lxxvi. 19. "I will send to Tarshish, Pul and Lud, *that draw the bow*, to Jubal," etc. Who drew the bow? "Lud," "Pul and

Lud," or "Tarshish, Pul and Lud"? The Hebrew reader doubtless knew the people called Lud were noted archers, cf. Jer. xlvi. 9. But the English reader does not.

Ps. xiii. 1, "How long wilt thou forget me *for ever*?" Plainly here and elsewhere we are guilty of something like a "bull" in rendering נָשַׁח literally. "How long wilt thou *not cease to forget me?*" is the meaning. Prov. xxv.

14, "[As] clouds and winds without rain, [so is] he that *boasteth himself of his gifts falsely.*" "Gifts" too often mean with us mental faculties or endowments. Besides it is "a gift" in the Heb. The proverb is aimed at such characters as the generous squire who enriched Parson Adams with imaginary benefices. We might render "[so is] he that *talks much about giving, and lies.*" Ps.

lviii. 9. "*Before your pots can feel the thorns,* He shall take them away with a whirlwind, the green and the burning alike." Does the reader see that here the enemies' abortive plot is likened to a traveller's camp-fire extinguished by a sudden squall? If not, the translator's work is lost. A paraphrase is difficult. But we may at least give "*Before your pots shall feel the heat of the thorn-fagots.*"

Ps. lxxi. 15, "My mouth shall tell of thy righteousness and of thy salvation all the day, for *I know not the numbers thereof.*" This is weak, for who reckons righteousness and salvation in figures? We must render freely, "*I cannot reckon the instances thereof.*" Eccl. i. 15.

"That which is crooked cannot be made straight, and that which is wanting cannot be *numbered,*" i.e. the deficit cannot be put to the credit side of human knowledge. But will not careless readers think the Preacher means, "the things which are wanting are too many to be numbered"? It is better to drop the idiom, and render "That which is lacking cannot be *supplied.*" Eccl. ii. 20.

"Therefore I *turned about to cause* my heart to despair concerning all the labour," etc. Surely the plain sense is

that the Preacher looked round, and the result was his heart despaired. Why not express this perspicuously?

Eccl. v. 20 still runs as in A.V. "He shall not much remember the days of his life, because God *answereth him in the joy of his heart*"? We would render here "*answereth him by giving him a joyful heart.*" There is a similar obscure use of this verb in Eccl. x. 19, "and money *answereth all things.*" The Heb. practically means "money *provides everything.*" If literalism be so essential, why not say, "money *answers every purpose*"? Ps. vi. 3. "My

soul also is sore vexed; and thou O Lord, *how long?*" This aposiopesis is common in Hebrew poetry; but surely in English we must finish the sentence somewhat as in P.B.V. "how long *dost thou trouble me?*" Isa.

xlix. 18, is obscurely worded, "Thou shalt surely clothe thee with them all as with an ornament, and gird thyself with them *like a bride.*" "Them" refers to the "children," or Gentile converts of Zion. But it is not meant that a bride girds herself with children. This would rather be said of a matron. Isaiah intends "Thou shalt gird thyself with them, *as a bride girds herself.*" Why not express this signification?

Prov. xxvii. 3, "A stone is heavy, and the sand weighty; but a fool's *vexation* is heavier than them both." Do the Revisers mean the vexation a fool causes, or that by which he victimizes himself? We know not; but are convinced the Hebrew **עָוָוָה** means the former. The fool's "vexatiousness" evokes a special poem in Prov. xxvi., and is continually inveighed against. Cf. also Ecclus. xxii. 15, "Sand, and salt, and a mass of iron, are easier to bear than a man without understanding."

Mic. i. 11, "The wailing of Beth-ezel *shall take from you the stay thereof.*" We believe the Revisers understand the passage as we do, but their English is unintelligible. Rend. "the wailing of Beth-ezel *shall be stopped by you.*"

Hab. ii. 17, "The violence done to Lebanon

shall cover thee, and the destruction of the beasts *which made them afraid.*" Of course the reader will think "which" refers to the "beasts." Rend. "*that* destruction" for "*the* destruction," and the sense will be plain.

Zech. ii. 8, "*After glory* hath He sent me unto the nations which spoiled you." "*In quest of glory*" would be more intelligible.

Gen. xviii. 10; 2 Kings iv. 16. The Heb. phrase is here "according to the time living." This means neither more nor less than "*this time next year.*" Why does the R.V. render vaguely "*when the season cometh round*"?

In Eccl. vii. 18 we do not think readers will understand "It is good that thou shouldest take hold of *this*, yea also from *that* withdraw not thine hand," as referring back to *vv.* 16, 17. Why not say, "*the one,*" and "*the other*"? So too in Eccl. xi. 6, in any book but the Bible the translation would be, "Thou knowest not which shall prosper, *the one or the other,*" (not "*this or that*"). Again, in Ps. lxxxvii. 4, R.V. gives "Behold Philistia and Tyre with Ethiopia, *this one* was born there." We should substitute "*each of these,*" for "*this one.*"

Ps. lxxi. 6. "He shall come down like rain upon the *mown grass.*" The Psalmist means either grass for mowing, or the second crop left to grow after mowing. In the one case we should render "*hay grass,*" in the other "*aftermath.*" "*Mown grass*" is probably meant for the latter, but it rather suggests "swathes of mown grass," which (as farmers often sorrowfully testify) are *not* benefited by rain.

A. C. JENNINGS.

W. H. LOWE.