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CHAPTER ONE

The Eclipse of Bible Translation

THE TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE into English has had a peculiar history. The first complete translation of the New Testament as well as of extensive portions of the Old Testament from the original languages, and also the first after the invention of printing, was done by William Tyndale in the 1520s. His work, alas, was permanently interrupted when he was seized by the Inquisition, strangled (not quite successfully), and then burned at the stake. Catholic authorities in this period, it is clear, took a rather dim view of vernacular renderings of Scripture. Tyndale, who was clearly a translator of genius, favored a notion that there was an underlying affinity between the Hebrew and English languages, and as a result that it was possible to render the true meaning of the Bible in a way that would speak directly to an ordinary plowboy. One may regard this as a beguiling fiction that helped to make possible the remarkable achievement of his English version. The Tyndale Bible provided the basis a generation later for the Geneva Bible, produced by Protestant exiles who had fled to Switzerland during the reign of

the militantly Catholic Queen Mary. More decisively, in the first decade of the seventeenth century Tyndale became the model for the King James Version (1611). The translators convened by King James took very many verses and countless phrases and clauses directly from Tyndale, but, even more important, he blazed a stylistic path for them even when they weren't copying him. An instructive case in point is their translation of Ecclesiastes. It is one of their most memorable achievements, capturing much of the haunting prose poetry of the Hebrew with its beautiful cadences (even if some of the key terms, such as "vanity of vanities" and "vexation of spirit," reflect a misunderstanding of the original). None of this is borrowed from Tyndale because he did not survive to translate Ecclesiastes, but in regard to diction and rhythm and the managing of many Hebrew idioms, he had given them an invaluable precedent.

It took a century or more before the King James Bible became the fully canonical English version. By the nineteenth century it was entirely dominant—some of the major works of American literature in this era are unthinkable without the matrix of the King James language—and, despite the welter of new translations that have been produced from then down to our own time, the 1611 translation has shown a surprising degree of staying power. As recently as 2014, it was still the preferred Bible of 55 percent of the respondents to a broad survey. It had undergone several successive revisions beginning in the later nineteenth century that mitigated the archaism of its language and corrected its more egregious translation errors while unfortunately somewhat flattening its style, but the grandeur of the original version, even if some of its language is now opaque, still clearly continues to appeal to a large number of readers. This preference for the King James Version is surely dictated in part by the woeful inadequacies of the twentieth-century English translations. Before considering the reasons

for this general decline, I would like to indicate briefly the genuine virtues and also the shortcomings of what has for so long been our canonical English Bible.

The committees—they were called "companies"—assembled under the authority of King James were composed of scholars and ecclesiastical figures with impressive credentials of erudition—many knew Arabic and Syriac as well as Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic—who were also immersed in the literary culture of their age. Launcelot Andrewes, the Anglican bishop who was probably the most influential figure among the company members, was one of the great prose stylists of the early seventeenth century, as his published sermons attest, and his fine command of the language surely left its imprint on the translation. The much-celebrated eloquence of the King James Version is very real, and that, coupled with its royal authorization, must have had a great deal to do with its rise to canonical status and with its profound influence on literary English.

One of the signal strengths of the 1611 translation is what I would call its inspired (not divinely inspired) literalism. The seventeenth-century translators worked with the theological conviction that every word of the Bible was revealed to humankind by God and that one didn't play games with God's words. A vivid typographical illustration of this conviction is the use of italics that has often puzzled modern readers. (In the 1611 printing it was less confusing because these words appeared in a roman font that contrasted with the more or less gothic font of the surrounding text.) The italics do not indicate emphasis, as they would in current practice, but rather the introduction into the translation of a word that is merely implied in the original. To cite a very common example, Hebrew has no present tense for the verb "to be." To say "I am Joseph," just two words are used—"I" (*'ani*) and "Joseph" (*Yosef*). The King James translators, given their scruples, could not permit

themselves to write "am" as though it actually appeared in the Hebrew, and so they set out the word in a different typeface to show that it wasn't literally in the Hebrew but had to be added because of the necessities of English usage.

The inspired literalism of the King James Version begins with its representation of Hebrew syntax in the prose narratives. Biblical prose predominantly uses parataxis—that is, the ordering of words in parallel clauses linked by "and," with very little syntactic subordination or the accompanying subordinate conjunctions such as "because," "although," or "since" that specify the connection between clauses. (In some cases, however, there are clues of context or grammar that give this same Hebrew particle the sense of "but," and in those instances translators are obliged to render it as "but.") My guess is that the King James translators followed the Hebrew parataxis not chiefly out of a stylistic decision but because they thought that if this is the order in which God put the Hebrew words, that order should be reproduced in English. In the Hebrew, parataxis is very much an artful vehicle, generating imposing cadenced sequences of parallel clauses and often exploiting the lack of causal explanation of the relation between clauses to create thought-provoking ambiguities. This was not a normal way to organize language in English, but it would become a strong literary option after 1611. Most of this has been thrown out the window in the modern English versions, impelled by the misconception that modern readers cannot make sense of parataxis and that everything in the biblical text needs to be explained.

There is another aspect of style for which the King James translators came to a happy solution that has been almost universally jettisoned by their modern successors. Biblical narrative makes do with a very small vocabulary. My own inference is that there was a conventional understanding that only a certain limited vocabulary could be used for narrative prose. One

principal reason for this inference is that there are many terms that appear in poetry but never in prose. In biblical narrative, for example, there is only one word for light, *'or*, together with a cognate, *ma'or*, that means "source of light" or "lamp." Biblical poetry, on the other hand, exhibits a whole handful of more elaborate or elevated words that would be the equivalents of such English terms as "brilliance," "radiance," or "effulgence." Telling a story rather than composing a poem in ancient Hebrew, you evidently were expected to refrain from such highfalutin language and restrict yourself to the primary term *'or*. By and large, the King James translators respected this stylistic practice whereas their modern successors have been impelled either to translate repeated terms differently according to context or to improve on the original by substituting a fancy and purportedly literary term or an explanatory one for the homespun Hebrew word.

Let me illustrate this lamentable trend in Bible translation with two verses from Genesis (7:17–18). Here is the King James Version: "And the flood was forty days upon the earth; and the waters increased, and bare up the ark, and it was lift up above the earth. And the waters prevailed, and were increased greatly upon the earth; and the ark went upon the face of the waters." All this should be perfectly intelligible to the modern reader, with only the archaic form of two verbs a little strange. Now I will cite, in order, Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish translations done in the second half of the twentieth century. The Revised English Bible: "The flood continued on the earth for forty days, and the swelling waters lifted up the ark so that it was high above the ground. The ark floated on the surface of the swollen waters as they increased over the earth." The New Jerusalem Bible: "The flood lasted forty days on earth. The waters swelled, lifting the ark until it floated off the ground. The waters rose, swelling above the ground, and the ark drifted away over the

waters." The Jewish Publication Society: "The Flood continued forty days on the earth and raised the ark so that it rose above the earth. The waters swelled and increased greatly upon the earth, and the ark drifted upon the waters."

It should be noted that all three modern versions do away with the parataxis of the Hebrew, introducing subordinate clauses ("so that . . .") and participial phrases where the original has independent clauses. In this fashion, the grand rhythm of parallel utterances is turned into something commonplace. I would especially like to direct attention here to the choices made for two verbs. The King James Version, faithfully following the Hebrew, has "the flood *was* forty days upon the earth" and "the ark *went* upon the face of the waters." To the modern translators this evidently seemed too simple, and so instead of "was" they use "continued" or "lasted," and instead of "went" they give us "floated" or "drifted." Such substitutions seriously compromise the beautiful dignity of the Hebrew with its adherence to a purposefully simple lexicon of primary terms. (The stylistic power of such simplicity was keenly understood by Hemingway, who of course was strongly influenced by the King James Version.) The actual picture of what is happening with the ark is also somewhat altered by these translators in their desire to "improve" it for the modern reader. One might perhaps infer that the ark was drifting, or drifting away, but the Hebrew does not actually say that, and this leads readers to the conclusion that Noah's ark was rudderless, which may or may not have been the case. In any event, the grand simplicity of "the ark went upon the face of the waters" is entirely lost. There is a sense that the modern biblical scholars who produced these versions drew on a literary experience limited to middlebrow magazine fiction, and so they labored under the illusion that they were making the Flood story more vivid for modern readers by introducing such locutions as "swollen waters" (a phrase

that might appear in a conventional short story about the Mississippi flooding) and the ark drifting away. These translations are also informed by what I would characterize as a rage to explain the biblical text. Elsewhere, I might add, the impulse to explain through translation has still more dire consequences because it becomes an explanation to make the Bible conform to modern views or modern ideologies. In the present instance, the translators, apprehensive that readers might not understand what happens when the rain comes down and the waters go up, bearing the ark on their surface, spell out the mechanical steps of the process in explanatory subordinate clauses—"so that it was high above the ground," "until it floated off the ground," "so that it rose above the earth." This is manifestly not how the biblical writers chose to tell their stories.

This celebration of the achievement of the King James Version requires some serious qualification. There are two problems with the 1611 translation that are scarcely its fault. The English language, of course, has changed both lexically and grammatically in the course of four centuries. Apart from students of Renaissance literature, not many readers today will know, for example, that "froward" means "perverse" or "contrary," and that "ward" means "prison" or "custody." There is not much to be done about such difficulties except annotation, something Herbert Marks has provided in his splendid Norton Critical Edition of the King James Old Testament. The other pervasive problem with our canonical English version is that the seventeenth-century translators, for all their learning, had a rather imperfect grasp of biblical Hebrew. At times they get confused about the syntax, and they repeatedly miss the nuance, or even the actual meaning, of Hebrew words. Usually this is a matter of being slightly off or somewhat misleading, as when, following the Vulgate, they transpose concrete Hebrew terms into theologically fraught ones—"soul" for *nefesh*, which

actually means "essential self," "being," "life-breath," or "salvation" for *yeshu'ah*, which means "rescue," "getting out of a tight fix." Sometimes, alas, there are real howlers. In the mysterious covenant between God and Abram in Genesis 15, the 1611 version reads "an horror of great darkness fell upon him," because they have taken an adjective, *ḥasheikhah* to be the noun it formally resembles. The Hebrew actually says "a great dark horror fell upon him," with no suggestion that Abram our forefather was afraid of the dark. Still more egregiously, in Job 3:8 we encounter cursers of the day "who are ready to raise up their mourning." The Hebrew in fact says "raise up Leviathan." The King James translators misread the mythological beast *lewayatan* as the rabbinic word for "funeral," *lewayah*, not distinguishing between biblical and rabbinic Hebrew, and overlooking the fact that the word as they incorrectly construed it would have an inappropriate feminine possessive suffix. Such errors are probably understandable because Hebrew was a book language for them, cultivated for barely a century by Christian humanists. By contrast, the great Hebrew commentators of the Middle Ages, such as Rashi and Abraham ibn Ezra, were immersed in Hebrew, thought in Hebrew, and—in the case of ibn Ezra—wrote poetry in Hebrew, and consequently had a much firmer command of syntax, grammar, and lexical nuance.

There is also a stylistic issue with the King James Version. It may be a little surprising to say that its treatment of poetry is by and large less successful than its representation of narrative prose. I would argue that this is often the case even when the lines of verse exhibit persuasive force, as they famously do in Psalms. Let me cite an instance that most English speakers know by heart, from the twenty-third psalm: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." This is grand, but the grandeur is nothing like the Hebrew. Instead of eight words and thirteen syllables, *gam*

ki 'elekh begei' tsalmawet lo' 'ira r'a, we are given seventeen words and twenty syllables. The power of biblical poetry inheres in its terrific compactness. The King James translators, attached to a more orotund and expansive Jacobean rhetoric, rarely produce English equivalents of this compactness. The English line from Psalms is a memorable line of poetry, but, stretching from margin to margin on the page, it reads more like a line from Walt Whitman (who of course was profoundly influenced by the King James Psalms) than like a line of ancient Hebrew verse. The underlying problem, I suspect, is that the King James translators, though they had an impressive feel for English, approached biblical Hebrew as a language to be deciphered from the printed page, and they often did not seem to *hear* it.

Here is a line of poetry from Job (3:11) that instructively illustrates both the remarkable stylistic strength and the weakness of the King James Version. The first half of the line—lines of biblical poetry usually show two inter-echoing halves, or "versets"—could scarcely be improved on: "Why died I not from the womb?" The Hebrew is *lamah lo' mereḥem 'amut*. As a translator, I envy the freedom of the King James collaborators to use a compact syntactic inversion, "died I not," whereas, working in the twenty-first century, I felt constrained to adopt the clumsier "did I not die." But in the second half of the line, alas, the translation unravels: "Why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly?" These fifteen words—all but one monosyllabic but nonetheless arhythmic—represent three words, eight syllables, in the Hebrew: *mibeten yatsa'ti we'egwah*. The meaning of the Hebrew is there, but the poetry gets lost in the verbiage. My own approximation of the Hebrew is "from the belly come out, breathe my last." For the three final words, "expire" would have been rhythmically preferable, but it seemed to me too abstract and Latinate for the diction of the

poem. As elsewhere, there is both gain and loss in translation choices.

The King James Bible, then, remains an imposing achievement, yet as I have indicated, it has its drawbacks. But why have English translators in our age fallen so steeply from this grand precedent? To begin with, I would note a pronounced tendency among them to throw out the beautiful baby with the bathwater. Those companies convened by King James, their modern successors assume, got it altogether wrong. We must now start from scratch, swerve away sharply from all that they did, treat biblical syntax in an informed way that can speak to modern readers, represent biblical terms with what we understand to be philological precision according to their shifting contexts, and make things entirely clear for people who want to know what the Bible is really saying. This impulse is misconceived on two grounds. First, the Bible itself does not generally exhibit the clarity to which its modern translators aspire: the Hebrew writers reveled in the proliferation of meanings, the cultivation of ambiguities, the playing of one sense of a term against another, and this richness is erased in the deceptive antiseptic clarity of the modern versions. The second issue is the historical momentum of the commanding precedent created by the King James Bible. It has been such a powerful presence for four centuries of English readers that a translation of the Bible that proceeds as though it simply didn't exist becomes hard to read as a version of the Bible that has any literary standing. I don't mean to advocate a direct imitation of the King James Bible, but I would propose that for an English translation to make literary sense it somehow has to register the stylistic authority of the 1611 version, or, one might say, it needs to create a modern transmutation of how the King James translators imagined the Bible should be rendered in English. When Stendhal was working on *The Charterhouse of Parma*, he noted

that he would like it to read like Fielding's *Tom Jones*—not of course, he hastened to say, like the *Tom Jones* of the eighteenth century but as an equivalent to the style of that novel as it might be written in the 1830s, and that, I would propose, is what modern translators of the Bible should try to do in relation to the King James Version.

Equally important as a reason for the gravely flawed modern translations of the Bible is a problem of what might be characterized as the sociology of knowledge. Modern translators of Scripture are almost all rigorously trained at a few premier universities that have well-established programs in biblical studies. In the United States, these would include Harvard, Yale, Johns Hopkins, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Chicago. Doctoral students at these august institutions acquire the tools of philological analysis, study the complex evolution of the biblical texts, learn Akkadian, Ugaritic, and in some cases, Egyptian as well. All this is certainly helpful for reconstructing the elusive meanings of writings removed from us by nearly three millennia. The general commitment, however, to eliciting clarity from much that is obscure has the unfortunate consequence for translation of introducing clarifications that compromise the literary integrity of the biblical texts. One manifestation of this tendency, to which I have already alluded, is the practice of repeatedly assigning the same Hebrew term different English equivalents according to the contexts in which it appears, a practice that sometimes may be unavoidable but often is not. Another consequence of the impulse for clarification is to represent legal, medical, architectural, and other terms from specific realms of experience in purportedly precise modern technical language when the Hebrew by and large hews to general terms (the priest in Leviticus, for example, "sees" the symptoms of a skin disease while in the modern translations he "inspects" them).

Though the training of modern biblical scholars is quite strong in exploring all the ancient Near Eastern contexts relative to the Bible, attention to the literary aspects of the Bible, which are essential to understanding it, plays no role at all in this training. Granted, there have been efforts in recent decades by some biblical scholars to bring to bear literary perspectives in their work, but these remain marginal in the field. It is still inconceivable for a course to be offered in prose style or narrative conventions in any of the major institutions where there are programs in Hebrew Bible. Moreover, the scholars, largely trained in the middle decades of the previous century, who produced the various modern English versions would never have dreamed of addressing such questions. Literary style, then, is never studied, and the translators consequently proceed as if the Bible had no style at all, as if a translator were entitled to represent it in a hodgepodge of modern English styles. The conventions and techniques of biblical narrative, which are manifested in crucial word choices by the Hebrew writers, as I have noted, have no part in the curriculum of biblical studies, and, with just a few exceptions, the same is true of the forms of biblical poetry—a deficiency that is even visible typographically in the modern translations, which often lay out lines of verse arbitrarily in breaks that do not correspond to the actual Hebrew lines.

The blindness to the literary dimension of the ancient texts also compromises biblical philology as it is taught in these institutions and then reflected in the translations of their graduates. Recovering the meanings of biblical words is conceived as a matter of establishing lexical values, and very little thought is given to nuance, connotation, or level of diction. In the story, for example, of the rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13, the noun *biryah* and its cognate verb, repeatedly used in this episode and very rare elsewhere, is regularly represented by the modern

translations, quite blandly, as "food." This is not, however, the normal biblical term for "food," and an inspection with the aid of a Hebrew concordance of all its occurrences reveals that it is invariably food offered to someone who has been fasting or who has been for some reason doing poorly, as Amnon in this story pretends to be doing. Thus an English equivalent such as "nourishment," which fits the narrative context and distinguishes this word from the usual term for "food," is required.

What this example should suggest is that you cannot determine the meanings of biblical words without taking into consideration their narrative or poetic contexts. The example from 2 Samuel 13 is an instance of missed nuance, but there are other cases in which the translators altogether misconstrue the meaning because of their insensitivity to the bearing of the narrative on the term. A striking case is the universal mistranslation of a rare Hebrew term, *ḥalitsot*, in the Samson story (Judges 14:19). All the modern translators labor under the misapprehension that the reference is to a garment—the Jerusalem Bible: "what they wore"; the Jewish Publication Society (telescoping two different words in the Hebrew): "sets of clothing"; the Revised English Bible, quite fancifully, with no philological warrant, "their spoils." Now, this Hebrew word is followed immediately in the text by another that sounds a little like it, *ḥalifot*, which unambiguously means "changes of garments." Samson's wager with the Philistine wedding guests had been that if they solved his riddle, he would give all thirty of them *ḥalifot begadim*, "changes of garments." The translators all assume that *ḥalitsot* also must mean some sort of garment. Instructively, *ḥalitsot* as something worn, but not really a garment, appears just one other time in the Bible. In 2 Samuel 2:21, when Saul's general Abner is being pursued on the battlefield by the swift-footed Asahel, Abner tells him, "Swerve you to your right or to your left and seize for yourself one of the lads,

and take you his *ḥalitsah*" (2 Samuel 2:21). The Revised English Bible people think this is a "belt"; the Jewish Publication Society proposes "tunic"; the Jerusalem Bible again fudges with "spoil." But any reader of the Iliad knows that what a warrior takes from his slain foe on the battlefield is not an item of apparel but his *armor*. (The King James translators actually got this right, perhaps because, unlike their successors, they were good readers of Homer, as were the Septuagint translators whom they followed, although they miss the meaning in the Samson story.) The root of the noun in question supports this conclusion. The word for military vanguard, *ḥaluts*, shows the same tri-consonantal root. What the warriors in the vanguard were wearing was *ḥalitsot*, armor. All this, moreover, throws piquant new light on a detail of the Samson story. His wager with the wedding guests was for *ḥalifot*, changes of garments. Infuriated by the trick they have played on him, he goes down to Gaza and kills not ordinary men in perhaps fancy robes but thirty warriors, and as a provocative gesture, he brings their armor, far more valuable than changes of garments, as payment to the thirty wedding guests. Attention, then, to what is going on in the narrative in both Judges 14 and 2 Samuel 2 yields an understanding of the meaning of the word, which in turn sharpens our perception of what is actually happening in the story. It is generally the case that there are livelier and more surprising details in the biblical stories than we first realize, but these get erased by translators who have an inadequate grasp of how the narratives work.

A consideration of literary context, not an activity promoted in biblical philology as it is generally practiced, can actually illuminate a crux in the biblical text. For readers unfamiliar with the field of biblical studies, it should be said that because the Hebrew corpus abounds in opaque words and phrases, the solution to cruxes has persisted as a prominent area of the field:

academic reputations are still sometimes patiently built on the publication of five-page articles on topics like "A New Solution to a Crux in Habakkuk." Here is a much-discussed crux from the victory psalm at the end of the David story (2 Samuel 22: 36): "Your *'anot* made me many." The noun I have not yet translated already caused confusion in the ancient world—the scribe copying this poem from Samuel in the Book of Psalms as Psalm 18 transformed it into a similar-looking word that means "humility." The modern versions are all at a loss. One translation, assuming the word means "to answer," introduces a circumlocution indicating that God answers His followers. Another, following the "humility" variant, proposes that God lowers Himself to rescue His faithful. The Jewish Publication Society cops out by translating the term as "providence," with no philological warrant, and then adding in a footnote that the meaning is uncertain. But *'anot* means two things—"to answer," and by a semantic skid, "to speak up" or "to call out." (It is used in this sense repeatedly in Job for the introduction of speeches.) If one looks at the poetic context here, the term appears in a small catalogue of powerful *weapons* that God provides to His warriors. This very term occurs in Exodus 32:18 when Joshua, a military man, says to Moses of the Israelites' noisy worship of the golden calf, "Not the sound of crying out [*'anot*] in triumph, / and not the sound of crying out [*'anot*] in defeat. / A sound of crying out [*'anot*] I hear." If one puts this relevant parallel text together with the poetic context of weaponry in 2 Samuel 22, it seems highly likely that the word here means "battle cry," a shout that strikes fear in the heart of the enemy, something like "the sword of the LORD," on the analogy of the battle cry used by Gideon's warriors to terrify the Midianites in Judges 7:20.

The absence of a literary perspective in the training of biblical scholars thus leads to serious deficiencies in the translations

they produce, but at least as problematic is the fact that most of them appear to be out of touch with the literary culture of our own times. The contrast with the 1611 translators is painfully evident. We live in an age of specialized bodies of knowledge, a little like special teams in football. If you are laboring in the vineyards of the ancient Near East at Harvard or Johns Hopkins, attending to its languages and to its archaeological terrain, you are not likely to be spending much time reading the novels of Saul Bellow or Ian McEwan or the poetry of W. S. Merwin. There is, then, a double problem: not only do the modern translators lack a clear sense of what happens stylistically in the Bible, but also their notion of English style, its decorums and its expressive possibilities, tends to be rather shaky. The essential point in all this is that the Hebrew Bible by and large exhibits consummate artistry in the language of its narratives and of its poetry, and there must be an answering art in the translation in order to convey what is remarkable about the original.

I encountered a symptomatic instance of this problem when I first began translating the Bible. I had sent a copy of my Genesis to an eminent biblical scholar with whom I had been friendly for many years. He was a superbly intelligent man of impressive erudition. He also had been a member of one of those scholarly committees that produced a new translation of the Bible, something that manifestly influenced his response to my Genesis. Though he tried to be diplomatic when he wrote back to me, it was clear that he thoroughly disliked my translation. One of his principal objections was to my repeated use of "and" at the beginning of sentences and clauses, in keeping with the Hebrew. The English language, he wrote me, could not tolerate the proliferation of "ands" in the manner of biblical Hebrew, and so a rearrangement in translation of the syntax was called for. For all his acuteness, this objection reflected a

distinct lack of awareness of what could be done with English literary style. As a literary scholar I had devoted a good deal of work to subtleties of style in English, and my rejoinder to my scholarly friend was that many masters of English prose, in part precisely because of the King James Version, had cultivated parataxis as a resource of expression. I noted in my response that Molly Bloom's soliloquy at the end of Joyce's *Ulysses* (which I suspect my friend had never read) uses "and" extravagantly again and again in parataxis, and manages to be the greatest piece of extended prose poetry in the English language of the twentieth century.

This clash over the use of "and" reflects what strikes me as a lack of imagination about the possibilities of English style that has been repeatedly evinced by the twentieth-century scholarly translators of the Bible. At least as grave, I think, is their very frequent insensitivity to the apt idiomatic use of the English language. It is somewhat perplexing that this should be the case, for these are, after all, highly educated people from whom one might expect a certain degree of general cultivation. My suspicion is that the problem stems from the specialization of knowledge that leads to a focusing on one area of rather technical expertise and a lack of intimate connection with other cultural spheres—precisely what was not true for the King James translators. Though I have no specific biographical information about the modern translators, it seems unlikely that they would have had any serious exposure to the prose of Margaret Atwood or Philip Roth, and, going back a few decades, to the prose of Nabokov, Faulkner, Hemingway, or Virginia Woolf, on the evidence of their own use of the English language. Let me offer a few examples.

Genesis 1:16 in my translation—but I will for the moment leave one word untranslated—reads as follows: "And God made the two great lights, the great light for *memshelet* of day and

the small light for *memshelet* of night, and the stars." The Hebrew word left untranslated is a verbal noun derived from the root that means "to rule," which is usually how it is represented in the older translations. Several modern versions opt for "to govern," which is not an altogether grating choice but tries to have it both ways with two different senses of "govern," the scientific or legal meaning, "to serve as or constitute a law for," and the political meaning, which suggests administration through vested power. Neither of these senses is more than loosely appropriate to the meaning intended by the Hebrew writer. The Jewish Publication Society version is more painfully inept: "God made the two great lights, the greater light to dominate the day and the lesser light to dominate the night, and the stars." As readers, we should not be indifferent to the fact that "dominate" entirely wrecks the beautiful cadence of the Hebrew. This is something I try to preserve by rendering the phrases as "dominion of day," "dominion of night," and I will revisit this choice in my chapter on rhythm. But what is more troubling about "to dominate" is the manifestly tin ear to the connotations of the word. "Dominate" is a term appropriate for political contexts—as, for example, in a sentence such as "The Soviet Union dominated the smaller states of Eastern Europe"—or for sexual perversion with whip and boots as accoutrements. It is certainly not what the heavenly luminaries are said to do to the day and night. One readily sees that a shaky sense of English leads not merely to stylistic infelicities but to the misrepresentation of what the biblical text says.

Perhaps improbably, the translators' ear can be still tinnier. This is how the JPS people render a line from the Song of Songs (1:13) that in the Hebrew is both delicately and lusciously erotic: "My beloved to me is a bag of myrrh / lodged between my breasts." "Bag" is all wrong for the Hebrew *tsror*—too big,

too bulky—which means "bundle," and in this intimate context of the woman's body, surely "sachet." Even worse, "lodged" is comical: it is a choice dictated by the Hebrew verb, which means "to spend the night," but an object lodged between parts of a body unfortunately suggests something like a chicken-bone lodged in the throat. Contrast Chana and Ariel Bloch's elegant solution, which dispenses with the verb and says with fresh directness, "all night between my breasts."

Here is the Revised English Bible's rendering of Exodus 1:15–16: "The king of Egypt issued instructions to the Hebrew midwives, of whom one was called Shiphrah and the other Puah. 'When you are attending the Hebrew women in child-birth,' he told them, 'check as the child is delivered, if it is a boy, kill him.'" Except for the two names and "king of Egypt" and "midwives," there is nothing in these two sentences that does not betray a palpable lapse of judgment. "Issued instructions" is pure bureaucratese, and a gratuitous explanatory gloss on the Hebrew, which reads simply "said." "Attending in child-birth" is a Victorian circumlocution for the straightforward Hebrew verb *meyaldot*, which means "deliver" (or very literally, a transitive verb meaning "to birth"). "As the child is delivered" is a paraphrastic substitution for "on the birthstool," a concrete element of ancient Near Eastern childbirth, which was done in a kneeling position. "Check" is a modern colloquial transformation of the Hebrew "look," and is really an expression that belongs in such sentences as "Check to see if the water is turned off." Finally, "he told them," inserted in the king's dialogue in between commas, represents nothing whatever in the Hebrew and is merely the misguided notion of the British translators as to how dialogue should be varied or "enlivened" by the insertion of such indications, as in conventional schoolboy fiction. In all these ways, the translation turns a beautiful bit of Hebrew narrative into something both ungainly and banal.

Lapses of judgment of this sort are altogether pervasive in the modern translations, ranging, as we have seen in these two examples, from infelicities to downright misrepresentations of the meanings of the original. There are, to be sure, single verses and even whole sequences of verses where the translations manage to be quite apt, but that is the best one can say of these modern English versions. One final illustration should suffice to make the nature of the problem clear.

In 2 Samuel 3:20–25, Abner, the commander of the Saulide forces that have been engaged in a civil war with David, comes to David in Hebron to sue for peace, promising to bring the northern tribes over to David. This is how the Jewish Publication Society committee chooses to convey in English the report of Abner's departure after he has concluded terms with David to end the civil war: "And David dismissed Abner, who went away unharmed." This very short sentence, which will be significantly repeated and then repeated with a crucial change, exhibits two fatal mistakes in translation. The initial verb, *shaleaḥ*, manifestly means "to send off." The translators may well have realized this, but they seem quite unaware that "to dismiss" has a negative connotation—one dismisses a subordinate—but a powerful general who has come to negotiate a peace treaty is "sent off," perhaps even with a ceremonial flourish. The Revised English Bible shows the same misconception that "dismiss" is an appropriate choice. The New Jerusalem Bible altogether changes the meaning by using "allowed him to go" (was he being retained by force?). The obscuring of the narrative shape of the Hebrew is compounded at the end of the verse by representing *beshalom* as "unharmed" (Revised English Bible, "under safe conduct"; the New Jerusalem Bible, "unmolested"). Now, it is true that the biblical *shalom* does not always mean "peace" and often has the sense of "well-being." However, in the present narrative context—and modern trans-

lators seem blind to narrative context—"peace" is the compellingly relevant sense. David and Abner have been at war with each other. Now they have agreed on terms, and David pointedly sends off his recent adversary "in peace." As I have indicated, this entire sentence is repeated by the narrator, once more concluding "in peace," and then again by David's courtiers, who report what has transpired to David's general Joab when he returns from a raid. At this point we get a *fourth* repetition of the sentence, by the angry Joab, who will pursue Abner and murder him. But in his iteration, the end of the sentence is ominously lopped off: "Why did you send him off, and he went, going off?" The vengeful Joab cuts "in peace" out of the end of the sentence and underscores the "going off" by using the conjugated form of the verb immediately followed for emphasis by its infinitive. This very verb, moreover, occasionally occurs as a euphemism for "to die." The haunting and extremely artful effect of the three repetitions and then a fourth with a swerve at the end is entirely eliminated from the modern English versions, which don't even show the repetition. Let me quote these three versions, which embarrassingly speak for themselves: Jewish Publication Society, "Why did you let him go? Now he has gotten away!"; the New English Bible, "How could you let him go and get clear away?"; the Jerusalem Bible, "You let him go away and now he has gone—why?"

This is not merely an issue of infelicity but of translation decisions that obscure or even distort what is conveyed in the Hebrew text. Most of the egregious choices here derive from the misguided impulse to explain everything for the English reader in purportedly crystal-clear terms. Thus, none of the translators is willing to concede that sometimes *shalom* actually means "peace." It is their unswerving conviction that the word always has to have a context-specific meaning and needs to be rendered in English in that light. To say that Abner goes

off "unharmed" or "unmolested" is to suggest that there might be a possible intention in David's camp to do him harm, but in this meeting in which Abner proposes to bring all the tribes of Israel under David's rule, there is no intimation that anyone harbors such an intention. And to say that Abner goes off "under safe conduct" implies that he may be traveling with some sort of armed guard provided by David—in which case, how is Joab able to murder him so easily? Translating the Bible well is not just a matter of making it sound good—which is to say, appropriately good for an ancient text structurally and semantically different from our linguistic world—but also representing what actually goes on in the Hebrew literary text faithfully and accurately. And it is worth noting that all these translators exhibit a kind of horror of repetition, egregiously failing to recognize that repetition is an essential element of the sophisticated art of biblical narrative—in this instance brilliantly deployed.

A brief comment is in order about this different linguistic world of the Hebrew writings. In the well-known distinction of the translation theorist Lawrence Venuti between "domesticating" and "foreignizing" translations, I would strongly argue that the latter option is the appropriate one for the Bible (even if it might not be the right course for, say, translating a contemporary French novel). Venuti favors foreignizing on political grounds because he sees it as a line of resistance to the global dominance of the major cultural powers. Such reasoning is obviously not applicable to the Bible, but avoiding the creation of the impression that the Bible was written in English the day before yesterday is important for a different reason: the Hebrew texts were fashioned with a linguistic instrument in many respects quite different from that of modern Western languages and in a cultural setting very different from ours, and I think the differences are worth preserving in a transla-

tion that can still be readable, despite its foreign and ancient coloration.

In all this, I clearly want to resist the notion of "dynamic equivalence" that has had some currency in recent Bible translations. The basic idea is to transpose the verbal formulations and idioms of the Bible into different ones that are entirely indigenous to the modern target language. One can see how such a procedure could make the "message" of the Bible more immediately accessible to readers in the many far-flung cultures where it is now read, but it inevitably entails a palpable degree of misrepresentation of the Bible's literary vehicle. Let me cite one brief example from one of the best of the English versions guided by dynamic equivalence, an intermittently evocative 1994 Catholic volume, *The Psalter*, framed for liturgical use, approved by a council of bishops, and announced on its title page as "a faithful and inclusive rendering." Here is what it does with Psalm 36:7: "Your integrity towers like a mountain; / your justice runs deeper than the sea. Lord, you embrace all life." My more literal rendering is: "Your justice like the unending mountains, / Your judgment the great abyss, / man and beast the LORD rescues." I would not object strongly to the first two versets of *The Psalter*'s translation, though "integrity" is a poor choice for the Hebrew *tsedeq* and "towers" and "runs deeper than," in reaching for eloquence, are an embellishment of the original. But "you embrace all life" as a dynamic equivalent of "man and beast the LORD rescues" is a flagrantly sermonic and explanatory substitution for the vivid and perfectly transparent Hebrew phrase.

In arguing for fidelity to the actual configurations of the Hebrew, I may seem to be close to the approach of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig in the German translation that they undertook in the 1920s, completed by Buber in the 1950s long after Rosenzweig's premature death. Although my concern

in this book is with English renderings of the Bible, a few words are in order about the Buber-Rosenzweig project because it represents such a radical break with all antecedent translations. They put great stress on the orality of the text and consequently arrange their version typographically in rhythmic units. This is an admirable undertaking (even if one may disagree with some of the typography) because, as I argue in chapter 5, the significant rhythms of the Hebrew have been gravely neglected in all the modern English versions except that of Everett Fox, Buber and Rosenzweig's American emulator. But the more salient radicalism of this German project is its effort to effect what Rosenzweig characterizes as "the excavation of the Hebraic character of the individual word." This is, I would concede, a noble aspiration, but it entails two problematic consequences. Buber and Rosenzweig (less so Fox as he revises) are relentlessly etymological in their treatment of the Hebrew. The result is the introduction of many words that do not really exist in the target language. Thus, instead of *Opfer*, "offering," for the Hebrew *qorban*, they use *Dahrnahung*, "nearbringing," because the Hebrew noun derives from a root that means "to draw near." Instead of "cultic pillar" or "stele" for *matseivah*, a noun that derives from a verb meaning "to stand," they translate *Standmark*, a term that has no general currency in German. The Hebrew word for "altar," *mizbeaḥ*, became, in Fox's initial English equivalent of Buber and Rosenzweig's German, "slaughtersite" because the verbal root of this noun means "to slaughter." (He later thought better of this and revised.) Such choices do considerable violence to the idiomatic integrity of the target language while, as far as we can tell, the ancient Hebrew writers manifest perfect pitch in the idiomatic command of their own language, so there is a serious distortion involved in the procedure.

One wonders, moreover, whether the ancient speakers were always so acutely conscious of etymologies as Buber and Rosenzweig appear to have assumed. Did the Hebrews of the first millennium BCE invariably think of "slaughter" when they heard the word *mizbeaḥ*? The fact that there was a *mizbeaḥ* for incense on which no animal sacrifices were offered argues against this inference. The other problem with this etymologizing translation is that some of the etymologies are rather dubious. Thus, Buber and Rosenzweig assert that *tsedeq*, "justice," actually means "verdict" (*Wahrspruch*) with scant evidence for the claim. Should "Justice, justice you shall pursue" (Deuteronomy 16:20) be understood as "Verdict, verdict you shall pursue"? (Fox, perplexingly, renders this in English as "Equity, equity you are to pursue.") Again, by rather contorted reasoning, Buber and Rosenzweig argue that *'ikavdah*, "I shall be honored," actually means "I shall appear," *ich erscheinege mich*. Making the Hebrew character of the language somehow evident in translation is in itself a worthy goal but not when it generates absurdities.

My complaints have been confined to what one might think of as "establishment" translations—that is, English versions done for the mainstream denominations by authorized committees with scholarly and institutional credentials. There has, however, been a proliferation of translations pitched to various special interests—feminist Bibles, Black English Bibles, colloquial American Bibles. Of the last, the most endearing and perhaps the most popular is a translation by a pastor named Eugene Peterson, which he calls not the Bible or the Holy Bible but *The Message* and which is intended to address contemporary readers in their own vernacular. This version has the Lord tell growing things in Genesis to "green up," and in the Lord's Prayer in the New Testament, the speaker asks God to "keep us

alive with three square meals." I don't want to dismiss such efforts because they are manifestly devised to make the Bible speak to specific communities that variously regard it as the word of God and may be seeking a sense of immediate relevance. What must be said, though, is that these amount to free adaptations and sometimes transmutations of the biblical texts that do not exactly qualify as translations, and so they remain beyond the scope of my discussion.

Hebrew prose narratives, as I hope these examples have suggested, manifest great subtlety and complexity in their literary shaping, and the same is abundantly true, in somewhat different ways, for biblical poetry. This artfulness, which cannot be separated from the religious meanings of the texts, sometimes can be conveyed effectively in English; sometimes an English solution can be found that to a degree intimates the stylistic strengths of the original, though imperfectly; and sometimes, alas, the translator must throw up his hands in despair because there seems no workable English equivalent for the stylistic effects of the Hebrew. In the chapters that follow, I will try to isolate five of the principal aspects of style in the Hebrew that I think a translator should aim somehow to reproduce in English. The aspiration may seem quixotic, but even a distant approximation of the literary art of the original is preferable to ignoring it altogether.

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