

Lost in Translation

Session 1: The What and the Why

He who reads his people's literature in translation is like one who kisses his mother's face through a veil.

Hayim Nahman Bialik

1. Why does translation matter, and why do translations vary?

Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament*, 2nd edition, 1994

Anyone who translates also interprets: the translation is not simply a rendering of the underlying text but also an expression of the translator's understanding of it. And every translator is a child of his own time and of his own culture. Consequently every translation must be understood and appreciated as an intellectual achievement in its own right. This is especially true of the versions of the Bible which were produced to meet the practical needs of a community. Most versions of the Bible have been the work of anonymous translators (usually of many translators) who have given concrete expression in their work to the intellectual assumptions of their age and their culture, the religious and other opinions which they adhere to or respect, the prejudices and concerns which they adopt consciously or unconsciously, their education, their ability to express themselves, the conceptual range of the language they are translating into, and many other factors. We must therefore distinguish between what comes from the original text and what is added by the translator—a formidable task to accomplish ...

Starting off the way it goes on: Bereshit 1: 1-2

א) בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ: (ב) וְהָאָרֶץ הִיְתָה תְהוֹ וְבְהוּ וְחָשֶׁךְ
עַל-פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל-פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם:

King James version (1611)

In the beginning God created the Heaven and the Earth. And the earth was without forme, and voyd, and darknesse *was* upon the face of the deepe. And the Spirit of God mooved upon the face of the waters.

Young's Literal Translation (1862, revised 1898)

In the beginning of God's preparing the heavens and the earth—the earth hath existed waste and void, and darkness [is] on the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God fluttering on the face of the waters, ...

Joseph Hertz, *Pentateuch & Haftorahs* (1936) = Jewish Publication Society (1917)

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. Now the earth was unformed and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters.

Silbermann edition of Rashi [no translator named] (1935)

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. But the earth was desolate and void, and darkness was upon the face of the murmuring deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering on the face of the waters.

Koren Jerusalem Bible (1977, based on Michael Friedländer's 1881 *Jewish Family Bible*, which was based on the King James)

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And a wind from God moved over the surface of the waters.

New International Version (1978, revised 1984)

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

New Jewish Publication Society (1985)

When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water...

Artscroll, Stone Tanach (1989)

In the beginning of God's creating the heavens and the earth—when the earth was astonishingly empty, with darkness upon the surface of the deep, and the Divine Presence hovered upon the surface of the waters.

Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (1995)

At the beginning of God's creating of the heavens and the earth, when the earth was wild and waste, darkness over the face of Ocean, rushing-spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters—

Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (2001)

First this: God created the Heavens and Earth—all you see, all you don't see. Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness. God's Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss.

Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses* (2004)

When God began to create heaven and earth, and the earth then was welter and waste and darkness over the deep and God's breath hovering over the waters, ...

Translation and theology

Isaiah 7: 14

לְכוּ יִתֵּן ה' הוּא לָכֶם--אוֹת: הִנֵּה הָעַלְמָה הָרָה וְיֹלְדָת בֶּן וְקָרָאת שְׁמוֹ עִמָּנוּ אֶל-

King James version

Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

New Jewish Publication Society

Assuredly, my Lord will give you a sign of His own accord! Look, the young woman is with child and about to give birth to a son. Let her name him Immanuel.

Translation and halakhah

Shemot 20: 13

לֹא תִרְצַח

You shall not kill OR You shall not murder?

Linus Pauling (1901-94), scientist and winner of Nobel prizes for chemistry and peace

Does the commandment 'Thou Shalt Not Kill' mean nothing to us? Are we to interpret it as meaning 'Thou shalt not kill except on the grand scale', or 'Thou shalt not kill except when the national leaders say to do so'?

2. What is the text we are translating?

Menachem Cohen, 'The Idea of the Sanctity of the Biblical Text and the Science of Textual Criticism', in Uriel Simon (ed.), *Hamikra ve'anachnu*, Tel Aviv 1979

The following conclusions about the state of the text in the Second Temple period can be drawn from the evidence of the scrolls:

1. [There were] several text-types of the Scriptural text: In essence, all Hebrew text-types represented by the M[asoretic] T[ext] as well as those behind the Septuagint and the Samaritan text, served the sect in its study and worship.
2. Beside the multiplicity of text-types described above, the Qumran scrolls show a variety of sub-types: within each text-type variations appeared, such as orthographic variants, conjunctive *vav* [present/absent], variant words, and grammatical forms. ...

3. Even the Masoretic text-type found at Qumran is not identical, letter for letter, with the Masoretic text we know today. ... In most cases, the similarity between the Qumran texts and the MT are in the general lines, not in the orthographic identity. This shows that the Qumran scribes did not have the notion of an 'ideal' text in the exact image of the current MT.
4. The lack of an authorized MT at Qumran can also be proven from the correction-methods used by the scribes. Corrections and additions can be found in many of the scrolls and it is obvious that they are not based on a single ideal text which was letter-perfect. ...
5. Illuminating in this regard is the writing of tefillin and mezuzot at Qumran. The exacting halakhic requirements that govern the writing of Torah scrolls, tefillin, and mezuzot, so familiar from later periods, is not present at Qumran; a missing or superfluous letter—or even word—did not invalidate tefillin or mezuzot. In the tefillin and mezuzot of the Qumran dwellers we find many kinds of orthography, and some variants are actually evidence for different text-types.

Spellings of William Shakespeare's name 1564-1616

Shakespeare, Shakespere, Shakespear, Shakspeare, Shackspeare, Shakspere, Shackespeare, Shackspere, Shackespere, Shaxspere, Shexpere, Shakspe~, Shaxpere, Shagspere, Shaksper, Shaxpeare, Shaxper, Shake-speare, Shakespe, Shakp

Sites near the Dead Sea where biblical manuscripts have been found

Site	Finds	Date
Qumran caves	c. 200 biblical manuscripts, reflecting 3 textual families	c. 250 BCE-68 CE
Masada	Biblical fragments	Up to 73 CE
Wadi Muraba'at	Biblical manuscripts including Trei-Asar (Minor Prophets)	70-135 CE
Nahal Hever	Minor Prophets in Greek, some Psalms (and Bar Kokhba letters)	100-150 CE

1 Samuel 11 (NJPS translation)

Nahash the Ammonite marched up and besieged Jabesh-gilead. All the men of Jabesh-gilead said to Nahash, 'Make a pact with us, and we will serve you.' But Nahash the Ammonite answered them, 'I will make a pact with you on this condition, that everyone's right eye be gouged out; I will make this a humiliation for all Israel.' The

elders of Jabesh said to him, ‘Give us seven days’ respite, so that we may send messengers throughout the territory of Israel; if no one comes to our aid, we will surrender to you.’ When the messengers came to Gibeah of Saul and gave this report in the hearing of the people, all the people broke into weeping.

Saul was just coming from the field driving the cattle; and Saul asked, ‘Why are the people crying?’ And they told him about the situation of the men of Jabesh. When he heard these things, the spirit of God gripped Saul and his anger blazed up. He took a yoke of oxen and cut them into pieces, which he sent by messengers throughout the territory of Israel, with the warning, ‘Thus shall be done to the cattle of anyone who does not follow Saul and Samuel into battle!’ Terror from the Lord fell upon the people, and they came out as one man. [Saul] mustered them in Bezek, and the Israelites numbered 300,000, the men of Judah 30,000. The messengers who had come were told, ‘Thus shall you speak to the men of Jabesh-gilead: Tomorrow, when the sun grows hot, you shall be saved.’ When the messengers came and told this to the men of Jabesh-gilead, they rejoiced. The men of Jabesh then told [the Ammonites], ‘Tomorrow we will surrender to you, and you can do to us whatever you please.’

The next day, Saul divided the troops into three columns; at the morning watch they entered the camp and struck down the Ammonites until the day grew hot. The survivors scattered; no two were left together.

The people then said to Samuel, ‘Who was it said, “Shall Saul be king over us?” Hand the men over and we will put them to death!’ But Saul replied, ‘No man shall be put to death this day! For this day the Lord has brought victory to Israel.’

Samuel said to the people, ‘Come, let us go to Gilgal and there inaugurate the monarchy.’ So all the people went to Gilgal, and there at Gilgal they declared Saul king before the Lord. They offered sacrifices of well-being there before the Lord; and Saul and all the men of Israel held a great celebration there.

4Qsam^a: the ‘missing paragraph’ from 1 Samuel 11 (trans. Frank Moore Cross)

[Na]hash, king of the children of Ammon, sorely oppressed the children of Gad and the children of Reuben, and he gouged out a[ll] their right eyes and struck ter[r]or and dread] in Israel. There was not left one among the children of Israel bey[ond the Jordan who]se right eye was no[t put o]ut by Naha[sh king] of the children of Ammon, except that seven thousand men [fled from] the children of [A]mmon and entered [J]abesh-gilead. About a month later

New Living Translation (website)

The translators of the Old Testament used the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible as their standard text. They used the edition known as *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (1977) with its up-to-date textual apparatus, a revision of Rudolf Kittel’s *Biblia Hebraica* (Stuttgart, 1937). The translators also compared the Dead Sea Scrolls, the

Septuagint and other Greek manuscripts, the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Syriac Peshitta, the Latin Vulgate, and any other versions or manuscripts that shed light on textual problems.

Definitions from Wikipedia:

Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS) is an edition of the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible as preserved in the Leningrad Codex, and supplemented by masoretic and text-critical notes. It is published by the Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft (German Bible Society) in Stuttgart.

The Leningrad Codex ... is the oldest complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible in Hebrew, using the masoretic text and Tiberian vocalization. It is dated AD 1008 (or possibly AD 1009) according to its colophon.

Further reading

Menachem Cohen, 'The Idea of the Sanctity of the Biblical Text and the Science of Textual Criticism', in Uriel Simon (ed.), *Hamikra ve'anachnu*, Tel Aviv 1979; available in English at: <http://users.cecs.anu.edu.au/~bdm/codes/CohenArt/>