

Lost in Translation: Texts, Translation, and Transmission

Part 6: How to Open a Window ...

What does the Hebrew mean?	How can the meaning of the Hebrew be conveyed in English?
Individual words	Which is the right word?
Phrases and idioms	When should phrases/idioms be translated literally and when not?
Formal features (alliteration, rhythm, repeated roots, connotations, layout)	Should alliteration, word count, roots, etc. be reproduced, and if so, how? How do we reproduce word 'halos'?
Register	How should different registers be represented?

And...

What is the aim of the translation? For whom is it intended?

1. Words: Consequences of mistranslation: an illustration

Psalm 2: 7-12

אֲסַפְּרָה אֶל-תּוֹק ה' אֶמַר אֵלַי בְּנֵי אֱתֶה אֲנִי הַיּוֹם יִלְדָתִיךָ:
שָׂאֵל מִמֶּנִּי וְאֶתְנֶנָּה גּוֹיִם נִחְלַתְךָ וְאֶתְנַתְּךָ אֶפְסֵי-אָרֶץ:
תִּרְעַם בְּשֹׁבֵט בַּרְזֶל כְּכֹלֵי יוֹצֵר תִּנְפְּצֵם:
וְעַתָּה מְלָכִים הַשִּׁכְּלִי הַיּוֹסְרוּ שִׁפְטֵי אָרֶץ:
עֲבְדוּ אֶת-יְהוָה בְּיִרְאָה וְגִילוּ בְּרַעְדָּה:
בְּשִׁקּוּבֵי פוֹרְיָאֲנָה וְתִאֲבָדוּ דָרְךָ כִּי-יִבְעַר כַּמְעַט אַפּוֹ אֲשֶׁר־י פְּלִתוֹסֵי כּוֹ:

King James Version (1611)

⁷ I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee.

⁸ Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession.

⁹ Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.

¹⁰ Be wise now therefore, O ye kings: be instructed, ye judges of the earth.

¹¹ Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling.

¹² Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him.

Acts 13: 32-33 (King James Version)

³² And we declare unto you glad tidings, how that the promise which was made unto the fathers,

³³ God hath fulfilled the same unto us their children, in that he hath raised up Jesus again; as it is also written in the second psalm, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee.

New Jewish Publication Society (1985), in the Jewish Study Bible (2004)

⁷ Let me tell of the decree:

The Lord said to me,

‘You are My son,
I have fathered you this day.

...

¹¹ Serve the Lord in awe;
 ^a tremble with fright,^a
¹² ^b pay homage in good faith,^b
 lest He be angered, and your way be doomed
 in the mere flash of His anger.
Happy are all who take refuge in Him.

^{a-a} Meaning of Heb. uncertain; others ‘rejoice with trembling’

^{b-b} Meaning of Heb. uncertain

Marginal comment on verse 7: Adoption language expresses the close kinship between God and the king, and is common in the ancient Near East. ... The *son* language here has played a significant role in medieval Jewish-Christian polemic ...

Marginal comment on verse 12: As noted, the translation *in good faith* is uncertain. The Heb[rew] word *bar* can also mean son, especially in Aramaic and this has sometimes been connected to the divinely adopted son (*ben*) in verse 7.

Psalm 2: 11-12 (Artscroll)

¹¹ Serve HASHEM with awe that you may rejoice when there is trembling. ¹² Yearn for purity, lest He grow wrathful and your way be doomed, for in a brief moment His anger will blaze; praiseworthy are all who trust in Him.

Rashi on Psalm 2: 12

Make yourselves diligent in purity of heart [*bor levav*].

Psalm 2: 11-12 (Robert Alter, 2007)

¹¹ Worship the Lord in fear,
 and exult in trembling.
¹² With purity be armed,
 lest He rage and you be lost on the way.
For His wrath in a moment flares up.
 Happy, all who shelter in Him.

Note: The two Hebrew words *nashqu bar* are the first of a long series of textual cruces in Psalms. As they stand, they make little sense, and the most elaborate efforts have been undertaken—none very convincing—to make the text mean something by extensive reconstructive surgery. The present translation hews to the Masoretic text, merely revocalizing *bar* (son? wheat?) as *bor*, ‘purity’. The usual sense of the verb *nashqu* is ‘to kiss’, but it also means ‘to bear [or, wield] arms’ ... As an idiom, to arm oneself with purity is not otherwise attested to in the Bible, but it might make sense here as a counterpoint to the implied raising of arms against Zion at the beginning of the psalm.

Psalm 2: 11-12 (Revised Standard Version, 1950s)

¹¹ Serve the LORD with fear, with trembling
¹² kiss his feet, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way; for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Psalm 2: 7-12 (New International Version, 1984)

⁷ I will proclaim the decree of the LORD:

He said to me, “You are my Son^d;
today I have become your Father.^e

...

¹¹ Serve the LORD with fear
and rejoice with trembling.

¹² Kiss the Son, lest he be angry
and you be destroyed in your way,
for his wrath can flare up in a moment.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

^d Or *son*; also in verse 12

^e Or *have begotten you*

^f Or *will break them with a rod of iron*

2. Do formal features matter too?

Bamidbar 6: 24-26

יְבָרְכֶךָ ה' וַיְשַׂמְרֶךָ.
יָאֵר ה' פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֶיךָ וַיַּחַנְדָּךְ.
יִשָּׂא ה' פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֶיךָ וַיִּשֶׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם

King James version (1611)

The LORD bless thee, and keep thee: the LORD make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: the LORD lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.

Artscroll (1996)

May HASHEM bless you and safeguard you. May HASHEM illuminate His countenance for you and be gracious to you. May HASHEM lift His countenance to you and establish peace for you.

Robert Alter, The Five Books of Moses (2004)

May the Lord bless you and guard you.
May the Lord light up His face to you and grant grace to you;
May the Lord lift up His face to you and give you peace.

Everett Fox, The Five Books of Moses (1995)

May Y-HWH bless you and keep you!
May Y-HWH shine his face upon you and favor you!
May Y-HWH lift up his face toward you and grant you *shalom*!

New Jewish Publication Society (1985)

The LORD bless you and protect you!
The LORD deal kindly and graciously with you!
The LORD bestow His favor upon you and grant you peace!

3. Register: does it sound 'right'?

Shemot 15: 1-6 (Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, 2001)

¹⁻⁶ Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to GOD, giving voice together,
I'm singing my heart out to God—what a victory!
He pitched horse and rider into the sea.
GOD is my strength, GOD is my song,
and, yes! GOD is my salvation.
This is the kind of God I have
and I'm telling the world!
This is the God of my father—
I'm spreading the news far and wide!
GOD is a fighter,
pure GOD, through and through.
Pharaoh's chariots and army
he dumped in the sea,
The elite of his officers
he drowned in the Red Sea.
Wild ocean waters poured over them;
they sank like a rock in the deep blue sea.
Your strong right hand, GOD, shimmers with power;
your strong right hand shatters the enemy.

Shemot 15: 1-6 (King James Version)

Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto the LORD, and spake, saying, I will sing unto the LORD, for he hath triumphed gloriously: the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea.
² The LORD is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation: he is my God, and I will prepare him an habitation; my father's God, and I will exalt him.
³ The LORD is a man of war: the LORD is his name.
⁴ Pharaoh's chariots and his host hath he cast into the sea: his chosen captains also are drowned in the Red sea.
⁵ The depths have covered them: they sank into the bottom as a stone.
⁶ Thy right hand, O LORD, is become glorious in power: thy right hand, O LORD, hath dashed in pieces the enemy.

Three theories of translation

1. *Literal / formal equivalence versus 'free' / dynamic equivalence*

John Dryden (1631-1700), 'Preface to Ovid's Epistles'

[Paraphrase:] ... translation with latitude ... the author is kept in view by the translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense; and that too is admitted to be amplified but not altered.

Preface to the King James Bible (1611)

We have not tied ourselves to an uniformity of phrasing, or to an identity of words ... that we should expresse the same notion in the same particular word; as for example, if we translate the Hebrew or Greek word once by *Purpose*, never to call it *Intent*; if one where *Journeying*, never *Travelling* ... Thus to mince the matter, we thought to savour more of curiosity than wisdom, and that rather it

would breed scorn in the Atheist, than bring profit to the godly reader. For is the kingdom of God become words or syllables?

Richard Elliott Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (2003)

Translation is an art, not a science. There have been long and tedious debates over whether a translation should be as literal as possible or should use the idioms of the language into which the text is translated. That debate has little to do with the reality of translation. There is no single rule. Some passages are clearest when translated literally. Some passages cannot possibly be translated literally without becoming misleading and sounding absurd. It is the art, the skill, and the sensitivity of the translator that make the difference. He or she must make the individual decision on each and every passage: how to capture it, how to convey what it means to someone who cannot read it in the original. Translation of the Bible is a string of decisions. The translator is always searching for the balance between literal and idiomatic. To get that balance exactly right is impossible.

2. 'Rhetorical translation' – Buber & Rosenzweig and Everett Fox

Principles of Martin Buber (1878-1965) & Franz Rosenzweig's (1886-1929) translation

- translations of individual words should reflect 'primal' root meanings
- translations of phrases, lines, and whole verses should mimic the syntax of the Hebrew;
- the vast web of allusions and wordplays present in the text should be visible in the target language.

Martin Buber, 'On Word Choice in Translating the Bible' (1930)

More immediately accessible to German ... is the idea of God's *ruach*, which in the beginning of creation hovers above the face of the waters, spreading its wings as the eagle spreads its wings above its children in their nest. ('Hover', however, does not necessarily evoke the image of a bird, in particular a bird holding steady in the air with gently beating wings; and it is important also here to consider the significant assonance.) Previously people were satisfied with opting for one of the two fundamental meanings of *ruach*, namely 'wind' or 'spirit'. Most often the second was chosen ... In this passage, however, *ruach* denotes not one of the two meanings but both together and undivided: the primordial surging from God, which takes on a natural form in 'wind', a psychological form in 'spirit'. ... Here, with *ruach*, the bridge between the two meanings is supplied for us precisely through the primordial surging at the beginning of creation, by the 'rushing of God'. Our rendering speaks of *Geistbraus* ('spiritsurge'), not of *Geist* ('spirit'); *ruach* appears as the 'Godstorm' ...

Bereshit 32: 21-22

כִּי־אָמַר אֲכַפְּרֶה פָּנָיו בַּמִּנְחָה הַהִלְכֶת לְפָנָיו וְאַחֲרֵי־כֵן אֶרְאֶה פָּנָיו אִוְלִי יֵשֵׂא פָּנָיו
וְיַעֲבֹר הַמִּנְחָה עָלָי פָּגְיוֹ וְהָיָא לִּי בְלִילָהּ־הַהוּא בַּמִּנְחָה:

New English Bible (1970), Bereshit 32: 21-22

... For he thought, 'I will appease him with the present that I have sent on ahead, and afterwards, when I come into his presence, he will perhaps receive me kindly.' So Jacob's present went on ahead of him.

Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (Bereshit 32: 21-22, 31, 33: 10)

For he said to himself:

I will wipe (the anger from) his face [*fanav*]
with the gift that goes ahead of my face; [*lefanai*]
afterward, when I see his face, [*fanav*]
perhaps he will lift up my face! [*fanai*]

The gift crossed over ahead of his face ... [*al panav*] ...

Yaakov called the name of the place: Peniel / *Face of God*,
for: I have seen God,
face to face,
and my life has been saved....

For I have, after all, seen your *face*, as one sees the *face* of God, and you have been gracious to me.

3. *Traditionalist Orthodox translations*

A. H. Moose, *The Bible Unauthorized* (1942)

Even the most perfect literal translation would not truly represent the Bible. It was not composed in such a way as to permit a literal translation. The original text of the Bible, particularly of the Pentateuch, is in reality no more than a shorthand text, but so cleverly composed that it makes sense even in its shorthand form, while its full meaning is discernable only by making use of the keys incorporated in it through a code of many signs, elaborated for that purpose ... A literal translation is thus out of the question if one is to understand the true meaning of the Bible. The correct way to understand the Bible is to give each verse in its shorthand text, and then give the traditional commentary.

[Nosson Scherman], Preface', *Artscroll Stone Tanakh* (1996)

The first goal of a translation must be accuracy; no effort was spared in the successful quest of that goal. Scriptural Hebrew is laden with nuance and meaning. The language is replete with allusion. The scholars involved in this task were consumed with the sense of mission—that they were dealing with the sacred and eternal word of God, not mere 'literature'; that their task was not to rewrite the text, but to convey its meaning faithfully. The translation balances the lofty beauty of the Hebrew with the need to provide a literate and comprehensible English rendering. Where a choice had to be made, we preferred fidelity to the text over inaccurate simplicity, but occasionally we had to stray from the literal translation or Hebrew syntax in order to capture the essence of a phrase or to make it intelligible in English ... In the Chumash portion of this work, the translation follows Rashi, 'the 'Father of Commentators', because the study of Chumash has been synonymous with Chumash-Rashi for nine centuries. In the Prophets and the Writings, however, following the guidance of our great mentors, we are more eclectic... While the translation always follows an authoritative opinion, we tried to choose the interpretation that would best fit the text and be as clear as possible to the reader.