





















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 *halitsah*" (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, *haluts*, shows the same tri-consonantal root. What the warriors in the vanguard were wearing was *halitsot*, armor. All this, moreover, throws piquant new light on a detail of the Samson story. His wager with the wedding guests was for *halifot*, 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 childbirth,’ 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 childbirth” 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, *shaleah*, 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 “unharméd” 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 sermonistic 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 *Dahrnehmung*, "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," *mizbeah*, 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 *mizbeah*? The fact that there was a *mizbeah* 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 erscheine 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.