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BRILL

Hebraisms in English versions of the Bible

A Hebraism is a linguistic element borrowed from Hebrew by another language. In addition to loanwords (such as *shekel, cherub*, and *Sabbath*; → English, Hebrew Loanwords in), Hebraisms include semantic loans, phrases, and language traits such as peculiar syntactical forms, rhetorical devices, and imagery. Many Hebraisms entered the English language through Bible translations, even from languages other than Hebrew. Most significantly, since the the earliest English translations were renderings of the Latin Vulgate (and not from the Hebrew original directly), Hebraisms in Old and Middle English versions of the Bible are based on those mirrored in the Latin text (Hashimoto 2008). In addition, given the Semitic style of both the Septuagint and the New Testament, Greek was a further indirect source of Hebraisms (Rosenau 1902:81-86; McGrath 2001:264).

The Old English Heptateuch (c. 1000) renders Gen. 1.1 as follows: *On angynne gesceop God heofonan and eorðan.* Although the subject-verb inversion is natural in Old English, the word order can be traced back to the Latin source (*In principio creavit Deus caelum et terram*) and

ultimately to the Hebrew original, which is rendered word for word by the Vulgate: בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ *bə-rēšīṯ bårå ʾĕlōhīm ʾēṯ haš-šåmayim wə-ʾēṯ hå-ʾårɛṣ*.

The first complete English Bible, produced by John Wycliffe and his followers in the late 14th century, was likewise translated from the Vulgate. As such, Latin continued to be a vehicle for Hebraisms, as in the use of redundant verbs of speaking. In the early Wycliffite version, for example, Jer. 44.25 reads *These thingus seith the Lord … seiende*; the wording faithfully reproduces *haec inquit Dominus … dicens*, with the participle rendering the Hebrew infinitive לֵאמֹר *lē-mōr* 'to say', used to introduce direct speech.

The 16th-century versions of the Bible in English – most notably Tyndale's (1530 [Old Testament]), Geneva Bible (1560), and Bishops' Bible (1568) – were translated from the original languages. In their wake comes the famous King James Version (KJV, 1611), also translated directly from the original Hebrew and Greek, and which drew heavily on its 16th-century precursors. One is not surprised, accordingly, to find "every page replete with Hebrew idioms" (Rosenau 1902:164). The authorized status of KJV made it the most influential English Bible by far. Its significant impact on the English language and literature,

ascribable to its long-lasting authority in a society where public and private Bible reading was widespread, guaranteed the acceptance and incorporation of numerous Hebraisms into the English language – with many or most speakers not even aware of them (McGrath 2001:259).

A survey of the Hebraisms contained in KJV was provided by William Rosenau, who divided them into two classes (Rosenau 1902:87-128): a) lexicographical Hebraisms, i.e, literal English renderings of Hebrew words and phrases, preserving the original Hebrew meaning; and b) syntactical Hebraisms, i.e., the preservation of constructions demanded by the Hebrew syntax, yet alien to English.

Lexicographic Hebraisms can convey an unusual range of meaning, which normally would be distinguished in English by a variety of words, yet it is expressed by one term in the "relatively limited vocabulary of Hebrew" (Norton 2000:423). Thus *flesh*, KJV's rendering of the Hebrew בָּשָׂר *båśår*, can denote 'meat' (Lev. 7.17), 'body' (Job 4.15), 'kinsman' (Gen. 37.27), 'creatures' (Gen. 6.13), 'mankind' (Isa. 40.5), and 'pudenda' (Lev. 15.2, 3, 7). Similarly, the meaning of *brother* is extended to include relatives (Gen. 14.16), fellow countrymen (Judg. 14.3), or members of the same caste (Num. 8.26); it can be used even to address strangers (Gen. 29.4) or to denote likeness, e.g., *I am a brother*

to dragons (Job 30.29). *House* can be a palace (*Pharaoh's house*, Gen. 45.16) or the temple (*house for the name of the LORD*, 2 Chr. 2.1); the same term can be metaphorically used to refer to a dynasty (*the house of Saul and the house of David*, 2 Sam. 3.6), a family (*house of their fathers*, Num. 1.2) or a nation (*house of Israel*, Exod. 16.31). In line with the Hebrew use of זֶרַע *zɛraʿ*, its English equivalent *seed* can denote posterity (Gen. 3.15) and race (Isa. 1.4).

Some adjectives are rendered according to their basic and commonest Hebrew meaning, thus acquiring peculiar connotations: in the sentence *and the man* was *very great* (1 Sam. 25.2), calqued onוְהָאִישׁ גָּדוֹל מְאֹד *wə-hå̄-ʾīš gåḏōl məʾōd,* the use of *great* for 'wealthy' is a Hebraism.

Lexicographic Hebraisms are also to be found in the peculiar usage of some verbs, such as *keep* for 'observe' (Exod. 31.16) and *hear* for 'listen' (Deut. 3.26; yet not in the idiom שָׁמַע בְּקוֹל *šå̄maʿ bə-qōl* 'listen to the voice of', which is appropriately rendered *obey*: Deut. 21.18). Biblical Hebrew imagery is retained in KJV's usage of other verbs, such as *melt* for 'tremble' (Ps. 46.6), *return* for 'repent' (2 Chr. 6.38), and *turn* for 'cease' (1 Sam. 12.20).

The English idiom *know someone in the biblical sense* (Ayto

2009:199) testifies to awareness of the euphemistic usage of *know* for 'have sexual intercourse' (Gen. 19.5); other English idioms arose from quotations of KJV's Hebraisms, such as *gird up thy loins* (2 Kgs 4.29), *lick the dust* (Ps. 72.9), *heap coals of fire upon his head* (Prov. 25.22).

Syntactical Hebraisms include the following:

- Use of plural where a singular is expected, e.g., *heavens,* reproducing the Hebrew plural שָׁמַיִם *šāmayim* (Gen. 2.1, etc.).

- Phrases reflecting the Hebrew use of apposition, such as *Moses my servant* (Josh. 1.2) whereas the natural English order would be *my servant Moses.*

- Faithful reproduction of cognate accusative, i.e., a construction where a noun is the object of a verb from the same stem: *vowed a vow* (Gen. 28.20) for 'made a vow'; *dreamed a dream* (Gen. 37.5) for 'had a dream'; *their service which they serve* (Num. 18.21) for 'the service which they render'. Most noteworthy is the use of cognate accusative in passages where it does not occur in the Hebrew text: פֶּן־אִישַׁן הַמָּוֶת *pɛn-ʾīšan ham-māwɛṯ,* lit. 'lest I sleep the death', is rendered *lest I sleep the* sleep of *death* (Ps. 13.3).

- Prolepsis, i.e., anticipation of a noun taken from a dependent clause and made the object of the verb: *God saw the light, that* it was *good*

(Gen. 1.4) - meaning 'God saw that the light was good' - is a word for word rendition of וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאוֹר כִּי־טוֹב *way-yar ʾĕlōhīm ʾet̠-hǻ-ʾōr kī-ṭōḇ*.

- Expression of the superlative by using a genitive: *servant of servants* (Gen. 9.25), *Lord of lords* (Deut. 10.17), *vanity of vanities* (Qoh. 1.2), *song of songs* (Cant. 1.1), *king of kings* (Ezek. 26.7), and many others. Though alien to English, this form has not only become sufficiently familiar to infer the meanings ('the lowest servant', 'the most exalted lord', 'the greatest vanity', 'the most excellent song', 'the mightiest king'), but also productive in forming new phrases (Norton 2000:423).

- Use of genitive where an adjective would be expected, namely for materials (e.g., *jewels of silver, and jewels of gold* 'silver and golden jewels' [Gen. 24:53]; *altar of stone* 'stone altar' [Exod. 20.25]) or attributes (*men of truth* 'honest men' [Exod. 18.21]).

- Use of preposition with noun for an adverb, such as *in haste* for 'hastily' (Exod. 12.11); this option is not alien to English, yet it could be regarded as a Hebraism as far as the source language may have exerted an influence upon the translator's choice.

- Redundant use of pronouns with repetition of the subject: *they*

went both of them together (Gen. 22.6); *the LORD your God he shall*

fight for you (Deut. 3.22).

- Coordinate verbs (i.e., parataxis) where the English usage would

    tend to subordination (i.e., hypotaxis): *created and made* (Gen.

    2.3); *God spake unto Moses, and said unto him* (Exod. 6.2).

- Pervasive use of the conjunction *and,* where either a different

    connective or no conjunction at all would be expected; it mirrors

    the widespread usage of the Hebrew conjunction -וְ *wə-,* which has

    a much wider range of meaning than English *and* bears.

Advances in biblical scholarship during the 19th century drew

attention to the need for a revision of KJV; both the Revised Version

(1885) and the American Standard Version (1901), however, did not

reflect the change in English usage. Even the 1952 Revised Standard

Version (RSV), although it profited from new understanding of the

Hebrew text and discarded archaisms that hindered modern readers

from comprehension, nevertheless stayed as close to the KJV traditional

phrasing as possible.

In the second half of the 20th century, new approaches to

translation found their fulfillment in the production of modern

committee-translated versions, which broke the continuity with the KJV tradition and were aimed at reproducing the original meaning in natural English. As set forth in the preface to the 1985 edition of the Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh* (NJPS, 1962-1985), the translators "rendered Hebrew idioms by means of their normal English equivalents"; a particular emphasis is put on the new "rendering of the Hebrew particle *waw*, which ... had the force not only of 'and' but also of 'however', 'but', 'yet', 'when', and any number of other such words and particles, or none at all". Similar guiding principles were behind the *New English Bible* (NEB, 1970), whose translators endeavored "to avoid anachronisms and expressions reminiscent of foreign idioms" (NEB's *Introduction to the Old Testament*). As for the *Good News Bible* (GNB, 1976), there was "no attempt to reproduce in English the parts of speech, sentence structure, word order and grammatical devices of the original languages" (GNB's postface: *Information about the translation*). Other completely new translations also deliberately avoid syntactical Hebraisms, for "thought patterns and syntax differ from language to language" and "faithful communication of the meaning ... demands frequent modifications in sentence structure", as stated in the preface to the *New International Version* (NIV, 1978). As for lexicographic

Hebraisms, some degree of biblical imagery is generally retained, especially when the meaning is clear: שׁוּב *šūḇ* 'return' for 'repent' (2 Chr. 6.38) is rendered *turn back* by NJPS, NEB, and NIV; an exception is GNB, which has *repent*. On the other hand, the euphemistic use of *know* (Gen. 19.5) has been abandoned for *be intimate with* (NJPS), *have intercourse with* (NEB), or *have sex with* (GNB, NIV).

A tendency is observable in most modern versions to eschew original imagery when it entails earthy language: an idiom referring to male human beings, מַשְׁתִּין בְּקִיר *maštīn bə-qīr* 'one who urinates against a wall' (1 Sam. 25.22, 34; 1 Kgs 14.10; 16.11; 21.21; 2 Kgs 9.8), is rendered literally in KJV (*that pisseth against a/the wall*), whereas NEB, NJPS, GNB, and NIV replace it with *mother's son*, *man/men*, or *male*.

Many biblical expressions are productively used in non-biblical contexts (Crystal 2010), but not all of them are to be regarded as Hebraisms. Some are rather English archaisms (Rosenau 1902:75-79), e.g., the retention of the 2nd person singular pronoun *thou/thee/thy*, a distinctive trait of biblical English. Being only used as a derogatory form of address to inferiors by the end of the 16th century, it was already obsolete in KJV's time; nonetheless it was inherited by KJV from the Bishops' Bible (McGrath 2001:266-269). Retained by some versions

(RSV, NEB) for the addresses to God, it was left behind by the majority of modern translations.

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