

Translator or Textual Critic?

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In *The Bible Translator*, Volume 4, No. 3, July 1953 I wrote on "Some Aspects of Bible Translation concerning the Old Testament", and first of all I expressed my opinion that "the Bible translator, and in particular the translator of the Old Testament, has to bear in mind that Bible translating is not practising textual criticism". I did not omit to state that "the translator has to occupy himself in more than one case with questions concerning the text", but I added, "he has to realise that it is not his first and foremost task to inquire into the correctness of this text; his first and foremost task is to translate the text which is lying before him". And I quoted what Philip J. Hyatt wrote in a review in *The Journal of Biblical Literature*, "The first duty of the modern translator should be to give a faithful rendering of the Massoretic text, whenever that can be made to yield good sense; if not, he may then resort to emendation on the basis of the ancient versions. Conjectural emendation should be a last resort, and is seldom necessary".

An article written by William A. Irwin, entitled "Textual Criticism and Old Testament Translation" in Volume 5, No. 2, April 1954 makes me feel the necessity of some elucidation, which I venture to propose in the following remarks.

I. When I fully agree with Hyatt as he says "the first duty of the modern translator should be to give a faithful rendering of the Massoretic text", I take, as scholars generally do, the Massoretic text as a datum, not troubled by the fact that there are some differences between various manuscripts and editions. And in my opinion the translator has to start rendering the Massoretic text according to the edition which he has before him (generally this will be the *Biblia Hebraica* of Kittel, 3rd edition). As long as he does not meet with considerable difficulties, it is not necessary to compare all the *variae lectiones* (even though they are not so numerous). Only in cases of recurring difficulties he may — and must — consult the *variae lectiones*, which perhaps present a way out. At present it will be of importance to consult the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Old Testament translators have to be grateful to Dr. Eissfeldt for having prepared a survey of the *variae lectiones* found in the Isaiah and Habakkuk scroll. It is not the task of the modern translator to trace carefully all the *variae lectiones*; this is the task of the textual critic. The first and foremost task of the translator is a different one. I wish to stress this point: only when the translator gets entangled in serious difficulties has he to consult the *variae lectiones*, if there are any.

II. When Hyatt calls it the first duty of the modern translator "to give a faithful rendering of the Massoretic text", this word "faithful" is interpreted by me in adding "according to lexicon and grammar"; that is to say: in harmony with what we know about the Hebrew language from the usage in the Old Testament. This does not imply that we will never come across a word which is employed in a sense not

found in any other text of the Old Testament; there are cases where it is manifest from the context that a certain word must be a *hapax legomenon* with respect to its meaning. Hyatt further limits the duty of the translator to give a faithful rendering of the Massoretic text by adding "whenever that can be made to yield good sense". In my own words I speak of "sufficiently good sense"; I am fully aware of the difficulties the Old Testament translator has to face, and in many cases there may be considerable divergence of opinion as to the idea of "good sense"; so a somewhat more moderate expression seemed preferable. And even "sufficiently good sense" may not always be attainable. I have pointed to some verses and phrases for which there are absolutely no satisfactory renderings in Volume 1, No. 1, page 13. But this does not relieve the translator from his primary task to render the Massoretic text *whenever that can be made to yield sufficiently good sense*. And I think I must subjoin this remark: translators should not be too hasty in assuming that a particular passage cannot be rendered so as to yield good (or sufficiently good) sense. At the 18th International Congress of Orientalists in 1931, S. Daiches from London presented some instances from the Psalms where new interpretation proved that verses or phrases which were regarded as hopeless can be very well translated in such a way that they yield really good sense (cf. *Actes du XVIIIe congrès international des Orientalistes*, Leiden, 1932, pp. 185-187).

III. When it is impossible to give a faithful rendering of the Massoretic text, the translator, as Hyatt says, may resort to emendation on the basis of the ancient versions. As an instance of such a case in Volume 1, No. 1, page 14, I pointed to 2 Chronicles 20:1, where instead of the unintelligible "the Ammonites and with them some of the Ammonites" we can read with the Septuagint "the Ammonites and with them some of the Meunites". This is a recognisable case in which the Massoretic text does not yield good sense, and in such a case (of which there are more instances to be adduced) the translator must make an exception to his rule — but exceptions prove the rule.

IV. Finally, I cannot pass over the words of Prof. Irwin on page 57 that my principles "function to sanctify the blunders and deliberate alterations which through the course of centuries and by the hands of a wide variety of men came into the sacred text". Here he voices a view on the textual history of the Old Testament which cannot be proved, and in former days led straight to the "lighthearted emendation" condemned by Albright (*Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, April 1950, p. 6). Fortunately, however, the picture has completely changed, and again with Albright may be said: "We may rest assured that the consonantal text of the Bible, though not infallible, has been preserved with an accuracy perhaps unparalleled in any other Near-Eastern literature" (in *The Old Testament and Modern Study*, edited by H. H. Rowley, Oxford, 1951, p. 25). The principles defended by me tend to caution translators not to return to the "lighthearted emendation in which Old Testament students used to indulge" (Albright, *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, l.c.).