

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

*The following questions have been selected from the files of the Translations Department of the British and Foreign Bible Society, and the answers supplied by the Rev. B. F. Price. The recommendation made in each case inevitably reflects the opinion of one person; the judgement of others may well differ from that given here. (Ed.)*

*The following abbreviations have been used:*

- AV: Authorized (King James) Version  
Knox: RC translation into English by Ronald Knox  
LXX: The Septuagint (Greek) version of the Old Testament  
MMM: Det Gamle Testamente, Norwegian translation by S. Michelet, S. Mowinckel and N. Messel  
OTTP: *Old Testament Translation Problems*, ed. by A. R. Hulst  
RSV: Revised Standard Version  
RV: Revised Version  
S-G: An American Translation (ed. by Smith and Goodspeed)  
V: The Vulgate (Latin) version of the Bible

### **2 Kings 6: 33**

**Q.** AV, RV: 'messenger'; RSV, S-G: 'king'. This emendation looks a bit arbitrary, but is there more to it than appears on the surface?

**A.** The words for 'king' and 'messenger' are very similar in Hebrew, one being *melek* and the other *mal'āk*, so the two could easily be confused. The emendation is based on the suppositions (a) that the king mentioned in 7: 2 would be present when Elisha spoke the words quoted in the intervening verse, and (b) that the king rather than one of his messengers would be more likely to say 'Why should I wait for the LORD any longer?' On the whole I would prefer 'king'.

### **Job 18: 20**

**Q.** RSV: 'west ... east'; AV, RV: 'before ... after'; S-G: 'younger ... older'; Knox: 'high ... low' (footnote: 'last ... first'); OTTP: no comment. I would be glad to have yours.

**A.** It seems better to take this to mean 'West ... East' rather than in a temporal sense, since the only other passage

which supports the meaning 'they that went before' (RV) for this particular word is 1 Sam. 24: 13, 'the ancients', where the meaning would naturally seem to be 'those of earlier generations'. It seems rather artificial to suppose that generations already dead and in the underworld are going to combine with future generations to be appalled and horror-struck at the fate of the ungodly. On the other hand, the word used here occurs in the sense of 'Eastern' a number of times (Ezek. 10: 19; 11: 1; 47: 18; Joel 2: 20; Zech. 14: 8—in the two latter places the same parallel occurs as in this verse). The expression 'Western sea' which occurs in these last two also occurs elsewhere for the Mediterranean.

### **Job 24: 20**

**Q.** RSV: 'The squares of the town forget them; their name is no longer remembered; so wickedness is broken like a tree.' This seems a case of RSV versus The Rest. What is your advice?

**A.** The new Peake's Commentary describes this as 'so corrupt that RSV

is no more than a guess at the meaning'. Literally it seems to mean 'a womb forgets him, a worm sucks him; he shall not be remembered any more; injustice has been broken like a tree', which is much as in S-G. Evidently the words 'forgets' and 'not remembered any more' are genuine, but the remaining words are very questionable, especially as 'shall feed sweetly on him' or 'sucks him' is a sense only occurring here, if at all, for a verb meaning 'to be sweet' which (a) never has a direct object elsewhere, and (b) should be feminine instead of masculine to agree with 'worm'. RSV follows a suggestion made during the last century that the three words which give all the trouble, *rhm mtqw rmh*, are a corruption of *rhb mqmw šmh*, giving 'The square (Job 29: 7) of his [native] place forgets him; His name is not remembered any more.'

### Psalm 110: 3

**Q.** I have seven versions, and no two of them agree on this verse—I would be grateful for guidance.

**A.** The difficulties of interpretation arise in part from the uncertainty of the Hebrew text itself, especially since the translators of the LXX evidently interpreted some of the Hebrew words before them in a sense different from that adopted by those who added the vowel points. Another source of difficulty is the ambiguity in some of the expressions used, and in connection with this the lack of any reliable tradition regarding the punctuation of the text. The footnotes in RV will provide examples of some of these difficulties.

Thus 'the day of thy power', where RV has the footnote 'or army' becomes 'the day you lead your host' in RSV; and for 'Thou hast the dew of thy youth', the footnote gives the alternative 'Thy youth are to thee as the dew', which becomes in turn in RSV 'like dew your youth will come to you'.

The LXX and V seem to read the same Hebrew consonants as we now

have, apart from the omission of 'thou hast the dew'. Since, however, they understood different vowels to be read with the consonants, they have a translation something like: 'With thee is leadership in the day of thy power, in the splendour of the saints. I have begotten thee from the womb before the dawn'. Most of the differences between this and RV can be accounted for by differences in vocalizing the Hebrew.

<i>RV</i>	<i>LXX and V</i>
thy people	with thee
offer themselves	leadership
	willingly
holiness	the saints (collective)
thy youth	I have begotten thee
the morning	before the dawn

From the above table showing the way in which the same Hebrew consonants can be read in two different ways, you can well imagine how, by selecting either from one column or another, a great variety of translations might be produced. Furthermore, there are some Hebrew MSS and early versions which read 'mountains' instead of 'beauties' (see RSV footnote). It is by no means certain where 'in the beauties of holiness' should go. Should it be taken with the preceding part of the verse (as in RV margin), and so refer to the people? or with the second part (as in RV), and so refer to the king? In fact the Zürich Bible attaches these words to the end of v. 2. It is also possible to read 'the day of thy power' as 'the day of thy birth', without making any change in the Hebrew consonants.

Having mentioned the ambiguity of the Hebrew, the same seems to apply to some English translations, e.g. S-G: 'the dew of your youth is yours'. RSV is not much more explicit with 'like dew your youth will come to you', since after all 'your youth' might mean one of at least three things—youth as a singular noun, as a collective noun, or as an abstract noun meaning youthfulness. On the analogy of the use of the

word elsewhere in the OT, it would seem to mean 'youthfulness', but I doubt whether the RSV translators had this in mind.

To sum up, I know of no modern English translation which does full justice to the Hebrew and at the same time gives an intelligible rendering, free from ambiguity. S-G keeps closer to the Hebrew than does RSV, but suffers from ambiguity: 'Your people will volunteer freely on your day of war. In holy array, from the womb of dawn, the dew of your youth is yours.' The translation suggested in the new Peake's Commentary may be of most help: 'Your people offer themselves freely on the day of your birth on the holy mountains from the womb of the dawn. You have the dew with which I have begotten you'. The writer explains that 'dew' would signify 'freshness'.

**Isaiah 63: 8f.**

**Q.** Following a lead in Peake's Commentary, here is our Lingala translation:

8. 'For he said, Surely they are my people, sons who will not deceive.

He became their Saviour  
in all their affliction.

9. It was no messenger, it was no angel,  
but his own face that saved them;  
in his love and his pity he  
redeemed them. . . .'

The Lingala incorporates in the text the form of *lo* that RSV mentions in a footnote. It involves translating *sār* as 'messenger' rather than 'affliction' but I believe there are good grounds for this? It is a wonderful verse—the sort of thing that makes translation work an exquisite pleasure at times!—and I hope we can retain it.

**A.** The whole section from 63: 7 to the end of chap. 64 is one of the highlights of the OT. It is rather surprising that RSV has retained the traditional rendering. Your translation can be reconciled with the pre-Massoretic consonantal Hebrew text in that it reads *l'*, which the Massorettes altered to *lō*. They under-

stood *lō sār* to mean '[there was] affliction to Him', but the LXX took *sār* to be *šār*, a word which occurs, for example, in 57: 9 (RSV 'envoys'). So you are fully justified in your translation. Possibly 'presence' rather than 'face' might be an improvement if that is possible in Lingala (cf. 2 Sam. 17: 11 where 'in person' is the translation of 'thy face'). LXX conveys the same idea of 'self' here. The passage may have become confused at an early stage in its interpretation through the influence of Ex. 33, which no doubt underlies this passage, and where the Presence of Yahweh is at first distinguished from His angel (vv. 1-3) and then apparently identified with him (vv. 12-16). Your translation is also found in S-G, the Jérusalem and Zürich Bibles, Mowinkel's new Norwegian translation and no doubt several others.

**Jeremiah 8: 20**

**Q.** 'The harvest is past, the summer is ended.' This presents some difficulty if, as I presume is the case, it refers to two events, one of which follows the other at a fairly short interval. Most of our food crops are all-the-year-round ones. The only one with a definite harvest time is the yam, and the word previously used to translate harvest actually means 'yam harvest', though its meaning is now widening as new crops are introduced. But the yam harvest occurs in the middle of the cool season, not towards the end of the hot one. So if 'summer' is translated by the name of our hot season, it will read very oddly.

**A.** Your agricultural calendar certainly poses a problem here. As I see the situation which Jeremiah had in mind, the year, with its agricultural cycle finishing in the autumn, has just come to an end. The New Year is therefore beginning, a year of fresh hopes of salvation, but the situation in which the people find themselves is a denial of the promise which New Year brings. The so-called 'Gezer Calendar' unearthed in Palestine at the beginning of the century,

ends with the month called *qayis*, which is the word here used for summer. I suggest the emphasis lies not so much on the hot-weather aspect of the word, as on its suggestion that the end of the year has come—much the same emphasis, in fact, as in Amos 8: 2, where the word ‘summer fruit’ is the same as the word ‘summer’ here.

### Lamentations 3: 13

**Q.** We have a word meaning the heart as a physical organ, but which is not regarded as the seat of the emotions, which are located in the mind or sometimes in the stomach. In this instance I am doubtful which to use. While the meaning is metaphorical, ‘arrows’ and ‘quiver’ must be translated literally, and therefore raises the question of whether ‘heart’ should not also be translated.

**A.** The verse literally means ‘He caused the sons of his quiver to enter my kidneys’, the same figure as in Job 16: 13. There RSV actually uses ‘kidneys’, but wherever the word occurs in Jeremiah (11: 20; 12: 2; 17: 10; 20: 12) it is translated as ‘heart’. The whole picture from the beginning of the chapter onwards is a combination of a metaphor and a literal description in so far as it is a vivid description of the nightmare effect of the suffering which the prophet is undergoing at the hands of God. It is very difficult to know where to draw the line between metaphor and literal statement. It would make the picture more vivid if you were to use the expression for ‘kidneys’ in this verse instead of ‘heart’, since you are presumably using the words for ‘flesh’, ‘skin’ and ‘bone’ in v. 4.

### Ezekiel 31: 14-18

**Q.** ‘Sheol’, ‘Pit’, ‘nether world’. Would you please comment briefly on the background of these words, particularly the last one.

<sup>1</sup> J. Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, I-II. London: Oxford University Press, 1926; p. 462.

**A.** These are three synonymous terms, as used in the OT. The dead were thought of as going into the underworld, a great pit situated beneath the earth’s surface—in fact, below the subterranean waters, as Job 26: 5 suggests. Some good descriptions are found in Isa. 14: 9-19 and Ezek. 32: 18-32. From these it would seem that Sheol is thought of as a vast pit in which the dead are somehow congregated and from which they can never get up again. Judging by Ezek. 32 the social distinctions on earth are perpetuated in Sheol. The burial of dead bodies doubtless affected belief about the after life, if you can call it life. Pedersen<sup>1</sup> describes Sheol as ‘the entirety into which all graves are merged . . . All graves have certain common characteristics constituting the nature of the grave, and that is Sheol . . . It belongs deep down under the earth, but it manifests itself in every single grave . . . Where there is grave, there is Sheol, and where there is Sheol, there is grave’. A term which is sometimes used for the inhabitants of Sheol is *rəpā’im*, translated ‘shades’, e.g. Isa. 14: 9; Job 26: 5. The root ‘to mend or join’, from which this is derived, suggests that the *rəpā’im* are ‘a massed community living a common life in the nether world’. ‘Pit’ and ‘nether world’ are used simply as synonymous parallels in Ezek. 31: 14, 16 and 32: 18, 24, to provide variety of expression.

### Daniel 5: 25, 28

**Q.** Do you favour PARSIN, PERES (RSV) or PERES, PERES (S-G)?

**A.** The difference arises from the fact that RSV follows the Aramaic in having the plural form of the last word and in repeating MENE, whereas S-G follows the Greek translation which has only one MENE and the singular form of the last word. It can be argued that there would be a tendency on the part of the Greek translators to make the

writing on the wall conform to the interpretation rather than that there should be, as at present, a divergence between them. There is a double play on words here, since the three words in their unpointed form are not only capable of being interpreted as passive participles, 'counted, weighed, divided', but also as units of money, 'a mina, a shekel, a half-mina'. This order is peculiar, however, and I do not know what significance is supposed to be attached to this particular sum of money. Whether one follows the Aramaic form of the text or the form which underlies the Greek translation, reasonable sense can be obtained and it is therefore perhaps better to stick to the Aramaic as in RSV rather than to follow the Greek. It is, incidentally, rather odd that this cryptic message should make a veiled reference to the Persians in the last of the three words, whereas the last verse of the chapter speaks of 'Darius the Mede' as the conqueror of Babylon.

**Hosea 4: 13f.**

**Q.** 'Your brides.' Should this be 'your wives', 'your sons' wives' (S-G), or perhaps 'your newly-married women'? This is tricky in Motu owing to there being two different forms of the possessive.

**A.** I take this to refer to the daughters in law (RV margin) of Hosea's contemporaries. The word means this more often than 'bride' in the OT. It could mean 'newly-married women' (cf. 2 Sam. 17: 3 RSV). I think the parallel with 'daughters' suggests the meaning 'daughters in law' rather than the other alternatives. The unfaithfulness of the women is seen to be a just reward for the similar escapades of the men. 'Hosea places adultery and unchastity of single women, which counted as capital crimes, on the same level as associating with professional temple-prostitutes, which counted as a religious act'—MMM, Vol. 3, p. 578.

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