

TRANSLATING JOB—PROSE OR POETRY?

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In his article in January 1968 on *Translating Biblical Poetry*, Mr. Culshaw pointed out that prose cannot be turned into poetry by setting it in uneven lines. He particularly discussed Psalms, but it seems to me that what he wrote applies equally to Job. Unless we can put Job into an English poetical form we have only done half of the translator's task.

We must then face the question, what kind of poetical form? Rhymed verse is notoriously difficult as a vehicle for translation. It leads the translator constantly to twist the thought of his original for the sake of getting rhymes. Any rhymed version of Homer will illustrate this point. So instead of rhymed verse we must choose rhythmic verse.

From Shakespeare onwards the noblest English blank verse has been written in lines of ten syllables, with five stresses. If we take this as the basic metre for a translation of Job, I do not think we shall go far wrong. But the thought of Job is so varied, between the tempestuous outpourings of a broken heart and considered philosophical utterance, that a variety of metrical forms is called for.

For example, Job's opening lament (chapter 3) might begin with three-line stanzas:

Perish the day that I was born!
Perish the night when it was said,
 "‘There is a man conceived’!"
Dark be that day!
Hidden from God,
 No light upon it shine.
Let darkness and the shade of death
O'erwhelm it; let clouds smother it,
 Eclipses bring it fear.
Dark be that night!
Swallowed up by gloom
 Not counted in the calendar.
That night be barren evermore,
No shout of joy be heard in it,
 No joyful song of men.

Again in Chapter 4 Eliphaz' vision calls for something less stately than ten syllable lines:

Into my ears a word did steal,
They caught its whisper in the gloom.
In the anxious visions of the night
When deep sleep falls on men,
Dread came upon me—shuddering fear,
Trembling in all my limbs.

Then came a draught of air.
 It brushed my face.
 Flesh crept.
 Hair stood on end.
 It stood there
 But its shape I could not see,
 An apparition
 Dim before my eyes.

But for Job's reflection on life (chapter 7) a basic ten-syllable blank verse, with minor variations, seems suitable:

Is not man's life hard labour here on earth?
 Are not his days in toil and service spent,
 Like those of a slave who longs for the shade,
 Like those of a servant who waits for his wage?
 So I inherit months of weariness,
 And nights of misery have been my lot.
 As soon as I lie down to sleep, I think,
 "When will day come that I may rise?"
 From evening shadow until morning light
 I only toss and turn.
 My body's covering is worms and scabs,
 My skin is cracked—pus oozes out.
 Swift as a weaver's shuttle go my days
 Reaching their end without a gleam of hope.
 Remember that my life is but a breath.
 No more shall I set eyes on what is good.
 Your eyes can see me now—but then no more,
 For while you watch I'll vanish from your sight.
 As clouds break up and disappear—so man
 Goes down to Sheol, and he comes not back.
 He never will return to home again,
 The place that knew him knows him now no more.

The translator into English, or into other languages which have a long literary tradition, will no doubt find many suggestive models for the forms and styles which may suit the various parts of Job. Where a language lacks a written literary tradition, the task for the translator is much more difficult. He must study the oral tradition of stories and proverbs to see what elements of rhythm or alliteration or balancing of ideas are used to heighten every-day style. In most languages it will probably not be possible for a foreigner to develop sufficient sensitivity of taste to translate a book like Job properly.

In such matters of taste it is usually our wisdom to keep silent. But in the poetical sections of the Old Testament I believe we should do more than most of us have done to encourage the "owners" of the languages of Africa and Asia to find an appropriate style.