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EDITOR: Euan Fry

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT: Margaret Lawton

R. KOOPS

“THE OIL TREE” and “DOVE’S DUNG”

Translating Flora in 1–2 Kings

Dr Robert Koops is a UBS Translation Consultant based in Gambia

[Here is the second part of this article, continued from the April 1998 issue of The Bible Translator. For the author’s general comments readers should refer back to that first part of the article.]

1 KINGS (continued)

10.2 Camels bearing spices (also in verse 10)

Hebrew *basamim* (singular *bosem*, *besem*) first occurs in Exodus 30.23 where it seems to be a general word introducing four kinds of spices used in making the oil for anointing the priest. Most such spices were derived from the dried resin of certain shrubs. In drier areas, translators will be familiar with such spices and their uses in perfume, incense, and medicine. Translators elsewhere may be able to use a general word or phrase like “sweet smelling stuff,” perhaps with a footnote explaining the nature, source, and function of the “stuff.” It is possible that these spices were in oil form, as GeCL indicates: “costly oil.”

10.11-12 A great amount of almug wood (Hebrew *'almugim*)

A survey of the English versions indicates the differences of opinion regarding *'almuggim* here and its parallel (*'algummim*) in 2 Chronicles 9.10-11. The majority (RSV, NRSV, NIV, REB, NJB, NLT) transliterate from the Hebrew in both places, but GNB, NCV, and CEV harmonize Kings and Chronicles by using “juniper” throughout. GeCL avoids the issue by translating “precious wood” in both places. The debate hinges on two questions:

- (1) Is *'almug* in Kings the same as *'algum* in Chronicles?
- (2) Where does the tree come from? Is it from Ophir (1 Kgs 10.11; 2 Chr 9.10) or from Lebanon (2 Chr 2.8)?

The botanical commentators answer as follows: Zohary says the trees are the same – sandalwood from India (via Ophir). Hepper says the trees are different – *almug* is the sandalwood and *algum* is the juniper

of Lebanon. FF says the trees are the same – their origin is unknown; they may be sandalwood, white sandalwood, or juniper.

The biblical commentators add the following: K-D says the trees are the same – sandalwood: 1 Chronicles 2.8 “inexactly groups *’algum* with cedar and cypress.” A dialect of Sanskrit has a word *mocha* for the sandalwood tree. Adding the Arabic article *al* would explain *almug*. So also N.H. Snaith in the *Interpreter’s Bible*. De Vries cites a Greek manuscript which has *peleketa* “hewn” and another one which says *apeleketa* “unhewn,” both of which would make a lot of sense, but neither of these has been followed by any major recent version.

Hareuveni (1994) tries to make a case for translating *’almug* as “coral,” on the ground that *’almog* is the modern Hebrew word for coral. It makes a good pair with “precious stones” in verse 11 and has support from the Babylonian Talmud, but using “coral trees” and harps in the temple (verse 12) seems unlikely.

10.25 Everyone brought his present ... gold, garments, *myrrh*, spices, horses

The Hebrew has *nesheq* (“armour”), which is followed by the majority of modern translations, which use “weapons”: KJV, NCV, NIV, NJV, GNB, CEV, NLT, NRSV, NAB, GeCL, (NJB has “armour”). Only RSV has “myrrh.”

The only puzzling thing about this verse is the conspiracy of silence on the part of the commentators over the word *nesheq*. K-D uses “weapons” with no comment, and neither *Interpreter’s Bible* nor Tyndale comment. Where does the RSV “myrrh” come from? Only de Vries (WBC) gives us a hint: some Greek translations have *stakten*, apparently translated by reading the Hebrew consonants *n-sh-q* as “to kindle”. This was taken perhaps as a reference to the burning of incense. Given the fact that this verse summarizes a chapter in which twice previously gifts of spices were mentioned (verse 2 and verse 10) with no mention whatsoever of weapons, it is easy to see why the Greek translators were tempted to get “spices” out of *nesheq*.

10.27 He made cedar as plentiful as the sycamore of the Shephelah

(Cedar is discussed in 4.33.) This is the first reference to the sycamore (Hebrew *shiqmah*) in the OT. It is a type of fig, of which there are many in Africa (Palgrave lists 32 in Southern Africa) where it grows wild. Like the fruit of the sycamore, the fruit of the African wild fig is barely edible; it is not as sweet or juicy as the domestic fig.

The focus of the verse is on the abundance of gold and cedar wood, so theoretically a cultural equivalent species could be substituted; for example, “as plentiful as the *gmelina*” (which is grown in plantations in West Africa). However, this introduces a mis-match between the transliteration of “cedar” and the local substitute. I would therefore suggest using the local word for fig, possibly with a footnote that states that this tree was abundant in Israel, or a transliteration. The function of the comparison is understood from the parallel phrase, “silver as common as stone.” Where fig trees are totally unknown, transliterations can be made

from English (*figi/piku*) or Hebrew (*shikima*). In contrast to the regular fig, the sycamore grows in the lower elevations ("the Shephelah," or coastal plain), a fact which could potentially come into use in a translation ("lowland fig" for example). GeCL uses *maulbeerfeigen* ("mulberry fig").

13.14 And he found ... him sitting under an oak (Hebrew 'elah)

Translators who started the OT at Genesis will have dealt with the oak/terebinth issue in Genesis 12.6; 21.33; 35.4. There are three closely related words in Hebrew ('*elon*, '*allon*, and '*elah*). FF, supported by Zohary, Hepper, Anderson, and Harrison (ISBE) advises that '*elah* be translated as "terebinth" in English; ('*allon* and '*elon* should be translated as "oak"). Those who follow this advice are REB, NJV, NJB, NAB, K-D.

It is surprising and somewhat disappointing that translators keep on repeating "oak" (GNB, NCV, NLT, NIV, CEV, NLT, GeCL) in total disregard of the botanical facts. Perhaps this is due to the confusion created by works like the Packer-Tenney-White *Bible Almanac* which is not always a reliable guide for translators when it comes to botany.

14.15 As a reed is shaken in the water

The Hebrew word *qaneh* is the most common of several Hebrew words for stiff grasses that grow in or near water. The reference here is metaphorical but complicated by the phrase "shaken in the water." Since *qaneh* typically grows in still water, we may conclude that it is not shaking because of the rushing of the water against it but rather because of the wind. In areas where there are streams with such grasses or reeds growing, translators will not find this difficult. In other areas, perhaps "tree/grass shaking in the wind" may be a meaningful substitute.

14.23 They built high places, pillars, and Asherim ... under every green tree

This idiom referring to places where pagan shrines were built occurs in Deuteronomy 12.2, which is parallel to the references here and in 2 Kings 16.4; 17.10, and 2 Chronicles 28.4.

A few English translators have found the phrase "green tree" redundant and changed to "leafy tree" (NJV), "shady tree" (GNB), "spreading tree" (REB), "in the shade of large trees" (CEV). Most of Israel is not tropical, and many trees lose their leaves in the dry season. It is to be expected, then, that people would choose for their shrines trees which were leafy (that is, shady) throughout the year, like mangoes. The translator should picture this situation and translate accordingly.

19.4-5 Elijah ... sat down under a broom tree

As FF indicates, the Hebrew *rotem* is correctly translated "broom tree" in English. NJB "furze" is an attempt to use a name more well-known to English gardeners, but both "broom" and "furze" are largely unknown to English-speakers who live in cities in the late 20th Century. (So, perhaps, is *Ginsterstrauch* in German, translated as "broom or gorse" in my dictionary.) Hence, most modern translators use a general expression here: "(large) bush," "tree" (GNB, CEV, NCV).

The story is not particularly enhanced by the actual name of the shrub, although it would have indicated to the original hearer that Elijah was in the desert, reinforcing the word “wilderness” at the beginning of the verse. In areas where plants are still known by species names, translators can select a shrub which grows in dry, barren areas (assuming it is big enough to offer shade to a grown man). Otherwise, the best suggestion is to use “small tree” or “shrub.” (“Broom” in Job 30.4 is discussed in a good article in *TBT* vol. 40, no. 3, July 1989.) If the translator decides to transliterate, I would recommend the Hebrew (*rotem*) as a base, rather than the English “broom.”

21.1-2 Naboth had a vineyard in Jezreel – see 4.25 (also in Gen 9.20).

21.2 That I may have it for a vegetable garden

The problem here is finding a general term for “vegetable” in the translator’s language. Many languages will have words for various types of “farms.” Note that Naboth’s vineyard was right next to the king’s palace, so the word for “vegetable garden” needs to be appropriate to that situation. If no precise word is available, translators will look for a phrase like “place where I can grow **vegetables**.” If no general word is available to cover things like tomatoes, cucumbers and onions, then we could be still more general and say “... where I can plant things”; otherwise we could say “... where I can plant my cucumbers and onions.”

22.10 At the threshing floor at ... Samaria

Some languages will have a special word for “thresh.” Others will have a word like “beat” plus the word “grain.” (In this verse, if necessary, “wheat” or “barley” could be used.) For example, “near the gate of Samaria, at the place where they beat wheat/barley.”

2 KINGS

4.18 Among the reapers – see comment on 1 Kgs 22.10.

4.39 One of them went out into the field to gather herbs, and found a wild vine and gathered ... wild gourds

How “herbs” (*’orot*) are linked to the plural of “light” via Isaiah 26.19 is a fascinating topic in itself, certain to side-track the unwary interpreter for at least an hour. What he or she needs here, however, is a general word for wild plants suitable for eating. The young prophet may not even have had any particular species in mind. What he found was a *gefen*. *Gefen* was apparently a general word for creeping or twining plants but like the English word “vine” it came to be used to refer to the grape vine in particular (FF page 188). In this case it was the wild gourd, colocynt (FF page 128), a common vine in dry climates. The fruit (*paqu’ot*) are somewhat poisonous, although in powdered form the gourd was used for medicine. (Hepper informs us that Emperor Claudius was poisoned with colocynt by his wife in AD 54.)

Some translators will lack a general word for "vine" or "creeper," but may (possibly) have a more general word "plant." Alternatively, a phrase like "wild cucumber" could be used. An important point to remember is that the young prophet did not recognize it himself. Thus, the story makes most sense if the words are quite general. Biblical botanists are fairly sure the vine he discovered was the colocynth but this is, in a sense, beside the point of the story, as are attempts to explain Elijah's amazing antidote, since it is intended to demonstrate his miraculous power.

4.42 A man came ... bringing ... bread of the first fruits ... barley, and fresh ears of grain in his sack

The Hebrew word for "grain" here (*karmel*) is an unusual one (related to *kerem* "vineyard," "garden," "produce," "fully-ripe grain," "fruitful field"). In other words the man brought some of the freshly-harvested barley (presumably threshed) and twenty "loaves" of bread made from barley flour. That it was from the first harvest of the season is probably intended to show that it was a special treat (although barley was only eaten when the wheat supply was all gone and the new wheat crop was not in yet).

5.26 Olive orchards and vineyards

This is the first clear reference to the olive (*zayit*) in 1-2 Kings. (The "oil tree" used in building the temple is debatable; see 1 Kgs 6.23.) The word "olive" first occurs in Genesis 8.11, and then in numerous places throughout the five "books of Moses." It occurs also in 2 Kings 18.32. Olives are not native to Africa, but a tree *Atilis Canarium schweinfurthii*, sometimes called the African olive, produces a very similar fruit. In places like Northern Nigeria, where people regularly eat this fruit, the tree could be used for "olive" in the Bible. In such a case I do not consider this a substitution but a naming of the Biblical tree with local terminology. If useful, a footnote can be written to explain that the Jews raised the tree on farms (as we do with mangoes and oranges).

In the absence of such a similar or closely-related tree, translators will have to transliterate from Hebrew (*zayit*) or from English (*olifi*, *wolifu*, *alifoo*). For vineyards, see 1 Kings 4.25; 21.1-19.

6.25 The fourth part of a kab of dove's dung for five shekels of silver

Desperate as the Samaritans must have been, they were probably not eating the excrement of doves, and four possibilities are given by the experts:

(1) Dove's excrement was dried and used as fuel (Hobbs). The text does not actually say the people ate it, although Hobbs leaves that possibility open.

(2) The original writer wrote *chartsonim* ("wild onion") and the text was copied wrongly, as *char yonim* ("dove's dung"). NJB and NAB take this line.

(3) "Dove's dung" was the name of a common plant (REB, footnotes in NJV, NLT, GNB). Possible candidates for the plant called "dove's dung" are the locust bean or carob (REB, NJV footnote), or the bulb of a flower (*Linacus*, Josephus).

(4) Dove's dung was processed into a salt substitute (Josephus, GeCL footnote).

Supporting option (2), Hepper (pages 45-46) says that *chiryonim* refers to the bulbs of the Star of Bethlehem (*Ornithogalum narbonense*) which were sold during the siege of Samaria at 300 milliliters (10 ounces) for 60 grams (2 ounces) of silver. Having lived in an area where the leaves of a plant called "bird dung" were a popular soup ingredient, I am prepared to believe this option.

Anderson, Zohary, and Hareveni do not mention "dove's dung," perhaps on the assumption that it is not a plant.

The point of this verse is that even plants that were hardly edible were sold for a high price. The translator should use a common measurement and coin instead of *kab* and *shekel* to help get this point across. The parallelism with "donkey's head for 80 shekels" will also help, as long as the value of the silver is expressed meaningfully. If the translator substitutes a local species for "dove's dung," it should be a low-value commodity.

6.27 From the *threshing floor* or from the *wine press*

The two phrases are used here as figures of speech (metonyms) to refer to "grain" and "wine." Some translations drop the figure, as it is difficult to see why the king would be trying to sound poetical here. "Grain" and "wine" are recommended, as in GNB, NCV, and CEV.

7.2 Two measures of *barley* shall be sold for a shekel ... and a measure of *fine meal* for a shekel

Barley (*sha'ir*) has been discussed earlier (1 Kgs 4.28); "fine flour" refers to wheat flour, and it may make sense to mention the species. The point of the verse is the low cost of food (in contrast to 6.25). Note that the fulfilment comes in verses 16-19.

7.18 *Barley* ... *fine meal* – see 7.2.

14.9 A *thistle* on *Lebanon* sent to a *cedar* on *Lebanon* (Hebrew *hachoch*: "the thistle ... the cedar")

Botanists are agreed that it is impossible to determine exactly what plants are referred to by the twenty words in the Bible referring to thorny plants. The best course for translators is to stick with the most general words or expressions available in their language. (For example, GeCL, *Dornstrauche* "thornbush.")

Thistles are thorny plants a meter or less in height, having a single stem and many short branches. Most of them have a beautiful purple or yellow flower guarded by very nasty, sharp sepals and prickly leaves. It is important to observe the metaphorical context here, although K-D (page 381) warns against extending the metaphor too far. According to K-D, we are to see only the folly of a small but proud plant trying to compare itself with a mighty cedar tree. If "thistle" is indeed the type of plant the writer intended, we are justified in seeing in the flower of the thistle a representation of King Amaziah's pride. He is also well armed (like a

thistle), having defeated the Edomites (verses 7, 10). King Jehoash, on the other hand, saw himself as invulnerable, like the mighty cedar tree.

The translator is advised to imagine a huge tree and a very small, thorny plant (perhaps one with a brightly-colored flower), and find a suitable equivalent. Then the whole story should be tested to see if readers can sensibly relate the parable to the political context.

16.4; 17.10 Under every green tree – see 1 Kgs 14.23.

18.21 Egypt, that broken reed of a staff

The Hebrew word *qaneh* (“reed”) is the same as the one mentioned in 1 Kings 14.15. The reed, being hollow, splinters easily when dry, and makes not only a ridiculous walking stick, but a dangerous one. The writer goes on to describe what could happen to a person who leans on it. The modern versions all describe the situation well.

The comparison does not require an exact translation of “reed.” An equivalent symbol of unreliability is what is needed. Translators should try to get the picture in their minds and express it as vividly as they can in a culturally effective way. The point of the verse is the unreliability of Egypt and/or the prediction that an alliance with Egypt would have painful results. The translation should be tested to make sure this point comes through.

18.31 His own vine, his own fig tree – see 1 Kgs 4.25.

18.32 Vineyards – see 1 Kgs 21.1. *Olive trees* – see 2 Kgs 5.26.

19.23 Cedars – compare 1 Kgs 5.8.

19.26 Like grass on the house tops, blighted before it is grown

The picture here (repeated in Isa 37.27 and Psa 129) requires the knowledge that Hebrew houses had flat roofs where dust could settle, forming a fertile but shallow environment for the germination of grass seeds. The grass, however, was doomed to wither quickly because of the lack of moisture and soil.

There is a textual problem here. HOTTP favors the Hebrew Masoretic Text “before it rises” (*lpne qmh* “before it grows up”) with a “C” rating over against the conjecture (*lpne qdem*) “before the east wind,” which is followed by NJB, REB and GNB. The HOTTP report suggests that the copyist(s), lacking sufficient knowledge of Hebrew, didn’t understand this line and guessed that it might have meant “before the east wind,” which is also very logical.

The consensus appears to follow the Hebrew as we have it (RSV, NIV, NCV, CEV, NLT). NJV follows the Hebrew, but expresses it as “before the standing grain” which makes no sense at all in the context.

19.29 Sow, and reap, and plant vineyards

It may be necessary in some languages to make clear what is sown

and reaped, either with a general word like “grain,” or a name like “wheat.” For “vineyards,” see 2 Kings 6.14.

19.30 The remnant of Judah shall take root downward and bear fruit upward

It may be useful for the translator to fill out the metaphor here by saying that they will be like a *tree* that puts down long roots and bears much fruit.

20.13 Hezekiah showed them ... spices – see 1 Kgs 10.10.

25.12 Vine dressers

Modern versions make clear that these were farmers who took care of grape vines by trimming them and keeping the weeds out.

Abbreviations used in the article

FF	Fauna and Flora of the Bible	NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
GeCL	German Common Language	NJV	New Jewish Version
GNB	Good News Bible	NLT	New Living Translation
NAB	New American Bible	REB	Revised English Bible
NCV	New Century Version	RSV	Revised Standard Version
NIV	New International Version	WBC	Word Bible Commentary

HOTTP Preliminary and Interim Report on the Hebrew Old Testament Text Project

ISBE International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

K-D Keil and Delitzsch, Commentary on 1-2 Kings

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