

NOTES ON THE MALTESE TRANSLATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

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The following article is reprinted with some small changes from the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, XIII, 2, by kind permission of the editor. Maltese is an Arabic dialect strongly influenced by Italian. The Catholic version of the Bible discussed below was made by the author of the article and published in parts from 1929 to 1959, when it was completed. Critical reviews and references to it may be found in JNES¹, CBQ², JBL³. Ed.

The purpose of this paper is to bring out and discuss certain passages of my translation which differ from most of the current translations, and some of which are generally overlooked by scholars owing to ignorance of Maltese. I should like to remark that as many parts of my translation are no longer on sale, a second revised edition is being prepared, and references are sometimes made to the yet unpublished revised edition.

Gen. 2:5. The Hebrew construction is badly involved and translations are more or less awkward. In my revised edition this verse is made to read thus: "When the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, there was as yet no shrub on the earth nor had any plant of the field sprung up, for the Lord God had sent no rain and there was no man to till the soil and to bring up the water of the river-canal to irrigate the surface of the earth." This rendering agrees with that of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD), except in v. 6 where the rendering "a mist rose from the earth and watered all the surface of the ground," which is also that of RSV and other modern translations, contradicts the previous statement of the lack of any irrigation.

Gen. 3:15. In this well known oracle the verb *shuph* makes difficulty. The verb is twice used, presumably with the same meaning. Hence all such translations as "He *shall crush* your head, and you *shall lie in wait* for his heel," (CCD), must be ruled out as incompatible with lexical exigencies. On the other hand the rendering of the verb *shuph* as "crush" in both occurrences would mean that the two adversaries, the woman's seed and the devil, will destroy one another, which is against the context which foretells the victory of the woman's seed and the total defeat of the devil. The difficulty is easily solved by giving the second *shuph* the meaning of a conative imperfect. The sense would be: The woman's seed will crush the serpent's head, while the serpent will try (but in vain) to crush (that is, to bite, to attack) the heel of the woman's seed. This is my revised rendering of Gen. 3:15. The existence of a conative imperfect in Hebrew is hardly noticed in

¹ *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 12 (1953), 135-138.

² *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 16 (1954), 450-457.

³ *Journal of Biblical Literature* 78 (1959), 254f.

Grammars, yet there are clear examples of its use; thus Gen. 37:21 *wayyaššilehu* is rightly translated by the CCD: "and he tried to deliver him." So other translations. "Volle salvarlo" (Vaccari); "suchte er ihn aus ihrer Hand zu retten" (Heinisch, von Rad). Wrongly: "il le sauva" (De Vaux, Dhorme); "rettete er ihn" (Junker). But again rightly Coppens: "tu t'efforcera (mais en vain), de la mordre au talon."⁴

Lev. 4:13, 22, 27; 5:2, 3, 4, 17. In all these cases the sentence "and he becomes guilty" is generally considered as a conditional clause coordinated with the first conditional sentence "If ... does something ...". In reality however the apparently conditional clause is a principal clause, and the *waw* prefixed to the verb is a *waw* apodosis, not a copulative *waw*. So in my revised edition.⁵

Lev. 23:36; Num. 29:35; Deut. 16:8. The liturgical term 'aşĕrĕt, which is usually translated "assembly, meeting," is rendered in my revised edition by *btala* which means "abstention from work, vacation." This rendering is justified by the epexegetical clause which follows: "thou shalt do no work."⁶

Deut. 32:36. The assonant expression 'aşûr 'we' āzûb, which recurs again in 1 Kgs. 14:10; 21:21; 2 Kgs. 9:8; 14:26, is generally taken to denote the whole people as divided into two opposite classes, such as slaves and freemen or those that are under age and that are of age. The CCD translates "protected and unprotected" and adds in a footnote: "The meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain." I have shown elsewhere⁷ that the two assonant words denote only one class of the population, the effect of the assonance being that of bringing out the fundamental meaning more emphatically.⁸ As this meaning is that of "powerlessness, helplessness," the sense of 32:36 is: all have disappeared, even the most powerless. My revised translation reads somewhat paraphrastically: "There remains no power at all." In 1 Kgs. 14:10; 21:21; 2 Kgs. 9:8 the expression is rendered: "even the smallest and the humblest," while in 2 Kgs. 14:26 the translation is: "there were none but afflicted and oppressed," that is all were utterly helpless, and there was no one to help.

Judg. 1:9 and 2 Kgs. 2:2. The verb *yarad* "to descend" is here translated "to ascend", a meaning which occurs in Ugaritic and is more suitable to the context.

Judg. 16:9. After Delilah's first unsuccessful attempt to discover the cause of Samson's strength all texts and versions read: "And his strength was not known," that is, the secret of his strength was not

⁴ *Analecta Lovaniensia Biblica et Orientalia*, Série II, fasc. 16 (1950), 55.

⁵ *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 8 (1946), 393-398.

⁶ See Harper, *Amos and Hosea* (New York, 1905) 134: E. Kutsch, *Vetus Testamentum* 2 (1952), 65f.

⁷ *Vetus Testamentum* 2 (1952), 371-374.

⁸ *Biblia* 36 (1955), 36-50, 287-304.

disclosed. But by giving the verb *yādā'* "to know" the meaning "to bring to submission," a better sense will be obtained: His strength was not brought to submission, ⁹ which is the reading of my revised edition.

Jdg. 19:2. The reason of the separation of the Levite's wife from her husband was, according to MT, her unfaithfulness. Many modern translators, however, adopt the LXX reading "she became angry," which is also the reading of my revised edition.

2 Kgs. 9:23. The verb *wayyānos* does not mean "and he fled" (RSV), "et s'enfuit" (De Vaux, Dhorme), but "he tried to flee, he wanted to flee." The verb is a conative imperfect, hence I have translated "he wanted to flee."

Job 6:4. "The terrors of God are arrayed against me." This is the current translation although some interpreters emend *ya'are ku* "are arrayed" into *ya'akeru* "have troubled"; so Kissane (*Job*, 1939); Ricciotti (*Giobbe*, 1924); Stier, hesitatingly (*Ijjob*, 1954). The rendering proposed by G. R. Driver "wear me down" ¹⁰ had already been adopted by me in my translation of Job published in 1947.

Job 29:18. "I shall die in my nest." The words "in my nest" are out of place and destroy the parallelism. They are, however, retained by Vaccari (*I Libri Poetici*), CCD, RSV, Ricciotti (*Giobbe*), Weber (*Le Livre de Job*), Stier (*Ijjob*). Other interpreters read *qāneh*, "reed" for *qēn*, "nest"; so Kissane (*Job*). G. R. Driver ¹¹ postulates a root *qn* suggesting the idea of strength and translates, "I shall die in my full strength"; this is unsuitable to the context unless one supposes vigor to be still fresh in old age. My translation follows the LXX: "I shall die in my old age" which is perfectly parallel with the following stich: "I shall multiply my days as the sand."

Job 31:35. "This is my mark." This is the current translation of *hen tawi*. By giving the word *tawi* the meaning "desire" (Vg. *desiderium*, cp. Maltese *tewja*, "desire") a better sense is obtained: this is my wish, that the Almighty would answer me. This is my revised rendering. ¹²

Job 36:27. The word *'ed* means either "mist" or "river-canal" as in Gen. 2:6. Both meanings are unsuitable here. Hence Sutcliffe's suggestion that *'ed* is *defective scriptum* and means "calamity" or, in this context, "destructive rain" is very probable ¹³ and has been adopted in my translation.

⁹ See Winton Thomas in *Journal of Theological Studies* 35 (1934), 298-306.

¹⁰ *Vetus Testamentum* Suppl. III (1955), 73.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 85f.

¹² E. F. Sutcliffe, *Biblia* 30 (1949), 71f.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 77-82.

Ps. 20:8. The last word *nazkir* is variously translated. My translation, "we are strong," agrees with that of many modern versions.

Ps. 55:8, 9. These verses are differently translated. My translation agrees with that proposed by G. R. Driver: "I will hasten to take refuge from the spirit of calumny, from the storm of slander, O Lord, from the altercation of tongues."¹⁴

Ps. 59:7. The word *ḥārabôt* is generally translated "swords". In this context, however, it means "deceit," being the plural of *ḥerbâ* not *ḥereb*. Hence my translation: "There is deceit on their lips."¹⁵

Ps. 103:5. The word *'edyēk* is translated "your lifetime" (CCD), "ton existence" (Tournay-Schwab), "le tue brame" (P.B.I.). My rendering is "the prime of your life."¹⁶

Prov. 15:2. Hebr. "The tongue of the wise makes knowledge good" or "precious," should be translated "the tongue of the wise announces knowledge" on the assumption of a Hebrew root *tabb*, "he knew."¹⁷

Prov. 21:4. As G. R. Driver rightly remarks pride cannot be called "the lamp of the wicked,"¹⁸ hence some other word must be read instead of *nēr* "lamp." Prof. Driver proposes *nēr* or *nir* in the sense of "fire, fire-brand, mark." The sense is: Pride, which is the mark of the wicked, is sin. This meaning has been adopted in my revised translation.

Song 1:4. The verb *ḥēbi anī* is translated either as a perfect tense "he introduced me" (Joüon, A. Robert, Pouget-Guitton, Siegfried), or as an imperative "introduce me" (Bea, Budde, CCD, Miller). In my translation the verb is taken as the protasis of a conditional sentence, thus: "If the king were to bring me into his Chamber, we will rejoice..."

Song 5:6c. The verb *bedabberō* is literally translated "as he spoke." But the bridegroom had already departed, and the bride could no longer hear him speaking. Some interpreters transpose this verse after 4b (so Miller, Buzy, CCD). Robert, following Joüon, reads *bedobrō*, "as he fled away" for *bedabberō*. All inconvenience is avoided if we read the verb *'abar*, "to depart" instead of *dabar* or *dibber* (to speak); the *ayin* and *daleth* are easily interchangeable in the old Hebrew script.¹⁹ My translation reads somewhat paraphrastically: "When I saw him no more."

¹⁴ G. R. Driver in *Journal of Theological Studies* 33 (1931), 40.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 42f.

¹⁶ G. R. Driver in *Journal of Theological Studies* 36 (1935), 151f.

¹⁷ G. R. Driver, *Biblia* 32 (1931), 181.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁹ See *Biblia* 19 (1938), 195.

Is. 2:16. "The pleasant imagery" (RV) and the "objets précieux" (Auvray-Steinmann), which make no sense have become "beautiful ships"; so my translation with Vaccari, Penna, Fischer.²⁰

Is. 3:19. The last word is generally translated "veil" or "headband" on the ground of Arab. *ra'la*. But the context seems to require the name of an article of jewelry, hence it is perhaps better to refer the word to Arab. *ragala*, "to gild" (Dozy) and translate "golden trinkets, pendants."

Is. 3:20. *Bāttē nēphēsh* is generally translated "scent-boxes"; cp. Akk. *nipšu* "odour". But *nephesh* means also "neck," and the *bāttē nēphēsh* may denote some sort of charm, perhaps a box containing strips with magical words, hanging over the neck; cp. Akk. *kunukku napīšti*, "the seal of (i.e., hanging upon) the neck." My translation reads: "magical ornaments."

Is. 3:26. The verb *niqqātāh* is generally translated "evacuated, deserted"; hence the sense: "abandoned, she shall sit on the ground." But the verb may perhaps be linked up with Akk. *naqu*, "to lament," and the sense would be: "moaning, she shall sit on the ground"; this makes a better parallelism.

Is. 4:5,6. Both the MT and all ancient and modern versions separate the last word of verse 5 from the first word of the following verse. In my translation the two words have been brought together so as to form an assonant combination *huppāh wesukkāh*, the effect of the assonance being that of emphasizing the idea of divine protection.²¹

Is. 5:4. The usual translation: "I expected it to yield grapes" is ungrammatical, because the subject of the verbs "I expected" and "to yield" must be the same. Hence my translation: "It expected to get grapes."²²

Is. 15:9. "A lion for the fugitives of Moab, for the remnant of the land." This is the current translation. Kissane emends and translates: "For the escaped of Moab there is sorrow, for the remnant terror." By rendering 'ērzēh for 'aryēh and 'ēdmēh for 'ādāmāh, the following sense is obtained: "I will destroy the fugitives of Moab, the remnant I will make an end of," which is my translation.

Is. 18:1. The "rustling of wings" is variously interpreted and translated. The best interpretation seems to be that which gives the Hebrew word *šilšal* the meaning of "boat" already recognized by the LXX. My translation reads: "winged boats."²³

²⁰ See G. R. Driver, *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy* (Edinburgh, 1950), 52f.

²¹ The two words are united together also by Auvray-Steinmann, quite independently.

²² See also G. R. Driver in *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy*, 53.

²³ *Ibid.*, 56; Kissane translates "winged skiff."

Is. 24:16. The word *rāzi* is difficult to explain. Auvray-Steinmann translate tentatively: "Assez! assez!" Fischer: "Verderben mir, Verderben mir." Kissane with the ancient versions: "A secret, a secret have I." Although the meaning "secret, mystery" occurs elsewhere and is common in the Qumrān literature,²⁴ I prefer to link up the word with Arabic *ruz*, "calamity." Hence the meaning is: "my calamity" or "woe to me."

Is. 28:16. *Lo Yaḥiṣh* is translated "he will not stumble" (Auvray-Steinmann, Vaccari, Fischer, Penna). My translation is: "will not be perplexed"; so also Kissane.

Is. 44:9. The word generally rendered "witnesses" or with a slight correction "servants, devotees" is translated without any correction "those who resort to them."²⁵

Is. 53:9 ab. The difficulties of the translation of this stich are well known. The words "and in his death, with the evil-doers" hardly make any sense unless some words are added. Before the publication of DSIa I suspected the word *bamatō* to be hidden in MT *bemōṭaw*, and my suspicions came true after the publication of DSIa. My translation therefore runs thus: "He was given a sepulchre with the wicked, and a burying-place with evil-doers."²⁶

Is. 54:7. The usual translation: "For a brief moment did I forsake thee, and with great mercy did I gather thee," destroys the parallelism. Parallelism is restored by giving the word *rēga'* the meaning of "emotion or momentary emotion." Hence my translation: "With little emotion have I forsaken thee, but with great mercy will I gather thee."²⁷

Is. 57:9a. "Thou didst go to the king with ointment." This is the literal translation of Hebr. and is accepted by Vaccari, Kissane, Penna. Auvray-Steinmann follow Vulgate, "thou didst adorn thyself." In my translation I have adopted G. R. Driver's reading *tishri* for *tashuri* and translated "thou didst wash thyself, that is, thou didst anoint thyself."²⁸ So also Fisher.

Jer. 31:2. The word *ḥen*, usually translated "grace", is here derived from the root *ḥanah* and translated "resting-place" in my revised edition.²⁹

Jer. 47:5. The word *'imqam* is usually altered into *'anaqim*, "the Anakim." But the word *'ēmeq* besides its ordinary meaning "valley" has also in Ugaritic the meaning "vigour." This meaning, which occurs

²⁴ E. Vogt, *Biblia* 37 (1956), 247-57.

²⁵ G. R. Driver, *Journal of Theological Studies* 32 (1931), 253f.

²⁶ That *bamah* means also "funerary installation" has been shown by Albright in *Vetus Testamentum Suppl.* (1957), 242-258.

²⁷ G. R. Driver, *Journal of Theological Studies* 36 (1935), 299.

²⁸ G. R. Driver, *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy*, 58.

²⁹ Reider, *Vetus Testamentum* 4 (1954), 277.

elsewhere in the Bible, fits here better than any emendation and has been adopted in my translation: "the rest of their strength."³⁰

Jer. 50:7. The meaning "abode" for *miqwēh* (which is generally rendered "hope") has been adopted in my revised edition.³¹

Ez. 7:7. "Mountains" at the end of the verse is a textual corruption and has been omitted in my translation. The latter half of the verse is made to read thus: "Near is the day, a day of tumult, not of joyful shouting."

Ez. 16:30. The first words are generally translated: "How sick is thy heart!" But by vocalizing *'amulah* as *'immaleh* and giving the word *libbah* the meaning "wrath" which it has in Akkadian and Aramaic, the following sense is obtained: "How am I filled with wrath against thee," which suits the context better than the current translations and has been adopted in my translation.³²

Ez. 22:24. "In a day of anger" is to be read "in a day of storm," that is, in a day of angry or stormy weather.

Ez. 27:4. The sense apparently is: Thy boundaries (that is, thy dominions) are in the midst of the sea; thy builders ... etc. But by linking up the noun *gebulayk*, "thy boundaries" with Arabic *jabala*, "he shaped, he created," a better sense is obtained: "Thy builders have given thee shape in the midst of the sea."

Ez. 32:20. The words "the sword is given" are variously emended. But the MT may be retained and translated, "the sword is ready, is appointed."

Ez. 34:13. The verse presents a serious difficulty. Flocks are taken to graze on mountains and in the valleys, but not in inhabited places. By referring the noun *mōshāb*, "dwelling-place," to Arabic *wasab*, "abounded with herbs," the meaning of meadow is obtained.³³

Ez. 39:16a. The usual translation is: "And Hamona shall be the name of the city." The destruction of the enemies is in conformity with the context more than the name of any city. Hence with a slight correction I have translated: "And the name (or the fame) of his multitudes shall come to an end."³⁴

Dan. 10:13. The current translation "I remained there" or "I was left there" disagrees with the context. How could the tutelary angel of the Jews communicate his message to Daniel, if he remained with the king of Persia? And if the angel was delivered from the hands of the angel of the Persians, who tried to intercept the divine message to

³⁰ G. R. Driver, *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy*, 61.

³¹ M. Wallenstein, *Vetus Testamentum* 4 (1954), 214.

³² G. R. Driver, *Journal of Theological Studies* 32 (1931), 366.

³³ Id., *Biblia* 19 (1938), 181.

³⁴ G. R. Driver, *Biblia* 19 (1938), 184.

Daniel, how could the angel still remain there instead of continuing his way? The difficulty is avoided if instead of *nōtarti* we read *hōtarti* with the meaning of "I excelled," i.e., "I prevailed." The patron-angel of the Jews prevailed over the angel of the Persians and so could carry his message to Daniel. This is the reading adopted by me in *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* and in my revised edition.

Hos. 4:10. The verb *lishmor*, "to observe," is generally emended. But no emendation is necessary if the word *zenut*, "fornication," is transposed backwards as the object of the verb *lishmor*. Hence the sense is: to practice fornication. My revised translation reads: "to give themselves up to fornication."

Hos. 5:12. The word generally translated "moth" is translated by me "pus," which agrees better with the context.³⁵

Hos. 11:3, 4. On the ground of Arabic analogy the cords of man or human cords and the bands of love have become cords and bands of leather, and the word 'ol, "yoke" is read 'ul, "suckling." The figure is that of one who lifts his or her baby and takes him into his arms binding him with leather strings for greater security and bending over him to give him food.

Amos 1:13. The words "they have ripped up pregnant women in Gilead" are out of context. Both G. R. Driver and J. Reider have shown that the noun *hārôt*, usually translated "pregnant women" here means "sandy and stony land."³⁶ Hence the sense is: "They have invaded the sandy and stony land of Gilead in order to enlarge their territory."

Amos 3:12. The mysterious Damascus has been eliminated in favor of "the head (or the upper end) of the couch."³⁷

Mic. 1:12. Hebr. *letob* sometimes means "very much"; hence instead of "they waited for good," I have translated "they were in very great anguish."³⁸

Hag. 2:17. In *we' ên' 'êtkêm 'ēlay*, the *nota accusativi 'ēt* is puzzling and the text is generally emended. But no emendation is necessary if we take the particle 'ēt as a particle emphasizing the subject. The sense is: You yourself not to me, that is, you have not returned to me.

Mal. 2:4. The words "that my covenant with Levi may hold" express a sense which is contrary to that intended by the writer. Therefore some interpreters read *mēhyôt* for *lihyôt* (A. Gelin). But no alteration is required if we give the verb *hayah* the meaning "to fell, to bring to an end," hence "to annul an engagement."³⁹ My translation is: "that my covenant with Levi may be annulled."

³⁵ G. R. Driver, *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy*, 66.

³⁶ *Journal of Theological Studies* 39 (1938), 261; *Vetus Testamentum* 4 (1954), 279.

³⁷ G. R. Driver, *Journal of Theological Studies* 39 (1938), 262. Otherwise in *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy*, 69.

³⁸ G. R. Driver, *Journal of Theological Studies* 39 (1938), 265.

³⁹ *Id.*, *Ibid.*, 399.