

A Plea for Fully Footnoted Translation
Isaiah 38:9-20 as Case in Point

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It is currently the case that in using a translation of the Hebrew Bible, it is often unclear how and why the translation departs, or seems to depart, from the traditional text. The problem might be solved in the future by offering better and fuller textual notes to the translation, and a footnoted online edition of the emended version of the received text that served as the base of the translation.

I offer here an example of what I have in mind. In the formatting of the Hebrew text, the prosodic-syntactic division implied by the accents of the Masoretic text (MT) is not always followed. Departures are marked with a circulus. In the footnotes, standard abbreviations are employed. The footnoted translation alone is offered below the fold.

The subdivision of the text into lines with one to two medial caesurae and into groups of two to three lines is in accord with [a working hypothesis](#) regarding the prosody of ancient Hebrew prosody. On this hypothesis, lines are composed of two to three part-lines each of which contains two to three prosodic words. As Joachim Begrich observed, the composition is written in an almost perfectly consistent *qinah* meter in which the second half of each line is shorter than the first half. *Qinah* meter in my view also permits half-lines of the same length (note the prosodic word counts in the left margin).

Departures from the consonantal text or vocalization thereof are marked by footnotes to the Hebrew and the translation. Apart from the thoroughly difficult patch in 38:16 – the reconstruction I offer there is perforce a shot in the dark – the suggested restorations are minor and similar to those accepted by text critics elsewhere. A far less conservative restoration of the whole has been offered in an excellent monograph by Michael Barré. Translation based on conjectural emendation is clearly marked as such, even when an ancient version reflects an identical result but not necessarily the same reading.

According to the superscription of this composition, it is a **מכתב** “inscription.” The contents may originally have been inscribed on a votive stela set up by Hezekiah to memorialize his recovery and his vow of praise. The ‘vow’ idea I owe to Duane Smith (p.c.). LXX and Targum translate a similar term, **מכתם**, in contexts analogous to Isaiah 38:9, with Στηλογραφία ‘inscription of a stela’ and **גליפא תריצא** ‘upright sculpture’ (Pss 16:1; 56:1; 57:1; 58:1; 59:1; 60:1).

An interesting question: are **יהוה** and El fully merged in this prayer, or are they separate deities?

Bibliography

Michael L. **Barré**, *The Lord Has Saved Me: A Study of the Psalm of Hezekiah (Isaiah 38:9-20)* (CBQMS 39; Washington: Catholic Biblical Society of America, 2005); Joachim **Begrich**, *Der Psalm des Hiskia: Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis von Jesaja 38:10-20* (FRLANT NF 25; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1926).

Isaiah 38:9-20

		מִכְתָּב לְחִזְקִיָּהוּ מִלְּדֹ-יְהוּדָה בְּחִלְתּוֹ וַיְחִי מִחֲלֹו	9
2:2	1 10	אָנִי אֲמַרְתִּי בְדַמִּי יָמִי [◦]	
3:3	2	אֲלֶכְהָ בְּשַׁעְרֵי שְׂאוֹל	
3:3	3 11	אֲמַרְתִּי לֹא-אֶרְאֶה יָהּ	
(2:2):2	4	לֹא אָבִיט אָדָם עוֹד	
(2:2):2	5 12	דוֹרֵי נֶסֶע וְנִגְלָה מִנִּי	
3:2	6	קִפְדֹתַי *כְּאֶרְג *חַיִּי	
3:2	7 13	מִיּוֹם עַד-לִילָה תִשְׁלִימַנִי [◦]	
(2:2):3	8	כְּאֶרֶי בֶן יִשְׁבָּר כָּל עֲצָמוֹתַי	
3:2	9 14	כְּסוֹס-עֶגּוֹר בֵּן אֲצַפְצָף	
(2:2):3	10	כָּלוֹ *עֵינַי לְמָרוֹם יְהוָה *יְהוָה	
3:2	11 15	מִה-אֲדַבֵּר וְאָמַר לִי	
2:2	12	נִדְדָה כָּל-שְׁנֹתַי *	
2:2	13 16	אֲדַנִּי *עָלִי [◦]	
3:2	14	הֵן *חַיִּי רוּחִי	
2:2	15 17	הִנֵּה לְשָׁלוֹם	
3:2	16	וְאִתָּה חֲשֹׁכֶת *נַפְשִׁי	
3:2	17	כִּי-הִשְׁלַכְתָּ אַחֲרַי גִּוָּף	
3:2	18 18	כִּי-לֹא שְׂאוֹל תוֹדֶךָ	
3:2	19	לֹא יִשְׁפְּרוּ *יּוֹרְדֵי-בּוֹר	
(2:2):2	20 19	חַי חַי הוּא יוֹדֶךָ	
(3:2):2	21 20	אָב לְבָנִים יוֹדִיעַ אֵל *אֲמַתְךָ	
(2:2):2	22	וְנִגְנוֹתַי *נִגְנוֹן כָּל-יְמֵי חַיִּינוּ	
		עַל-בֵּית יְהוָה	

L 4 M חדל, rd חלד; cf S (metathesis). L 6 M רעי, voc רעי (alt sp of רעה 'shepherd'); cf Sym, T. M קפדתי, voc קפדתי; cf Th, Sym, Aq, V, S, T. M כארג, voc כארג parall with כאהל רעי; cf G, Th, S. L 7 M שויתי, rd שפיתי; cf 1QIsa^a (ו/פ confusion). L 10 M דלו, rd כלו; cf LXX; Ps 69:4; 119:122-23 (כ/ד confusion). M אדני, rd יהוה; cf 1QIsa^b. M עשקה, voc עשקה 'contend' (cf Gen 26:20). L 12 M נדדה כל-שנותי, rd נדדה כל-שנותי 'all my sleep fled'; cf S, Ar (א/ג confusion; incorrect understanding of שנותי leading to add of *mater lectionis*). L 13-14 M עלי, rd עליהם יחיו ולכל-בהן (non-recognition of עלי as DN; incorrect word division; non-recognition of archaic sp [המחיה in place of המחיי]); cf 38:12; addition of י and וי confusion; כ/ל metathesis). L 16 M חשקת, rd חשכת; cf V (aural error). L 19 M ישברו, rd ישפרו (alt sp of יספרו; ב/פ confusion). M אל, voc אל (non-recognition of DN). L 20 M אל, voc אל; cf 1QIsa^a; 1QIsa^b (non-recognition of DN). L 22 M נגנותי; voc נגנותי (non-recognition of archaic case-ending); cf. Hab 3:19.

⁹ The inscription of King Hezekiah of Judah. When he became sick he recovered from his sickness.

- ¹⁰ I really thought¹
in the middle of my days:
Let me enter the gates of Sheol,
I've become a burden my remaining years.
- ¹¹ I thought¹: I cannot see יה,
יה in the land of the living,
no longer see a fellow human
or other denizens of this world.²
- ¹² My surroundings are pulled up, taken from me
like a shepherd's³ tent;
my life is bundled up⁴ like a cloth,⁵
he cuts me from the thrum.
In one day's time⁶ you finish me!
¹³ Worn down I am⁷ by morning.
Like a lion he breaks all my bones.
In one day's time⁶ you finish me!
- ¹⁴ Like a swallow I pipe,
like a dove I moan.
I cried out my eyes⁸ to heaven, יהוה!⁹
Contend¹⁰ for me, be my surety!
- ¹⁵ What might I say that he speak on my behalf?
He it is who wrought it.
All my sleep fled¹¹
because of the bitterness of my soul.
- ¹⁶ Lord, ¹²Elyon,¹³
who revives every heart,
- ¹⁷ here¹² is my life-breath:
may you restore me and revive me!
It was for good
that my bitterness was bitter:
it was you who kept my soul back¹⁴
from the pit of destruction,
for you have cast behind your back
all my sins.
- ¹⁸ For it is not Sheol that praises you,
death that extols you;
those who go down to the pit cannot recount,¹⁵
El,¹⁶ your constancy.
- ¹⁹ The living, the one who is living praises you
as I do today;
a father tells sons, El,¹⁷ of your constancy,

²⁰ how יהוה saved me,
and songs¹⁸ we will sing all the days of our lives
before the house of יהוה.

¹ Lit. *I said*.

² M lit. *along with those who inhabit cessation*. *Cessation*: read *age* = *this world*; cf. Syriac; Yefet ben Eli; Saadya.

³ M *my shepherd*, read *shepherd*; conjectural emendation; cf. Targum, Symmachus.

⁴ M *I bundled*, read *I was bundled up*; cf. Theodotion; Symmachus, Aquila, Vulgate, Syriac, and Targum.

⁵ M *weaver*; read *cloth*; cf. Greek, Theodotion, Syriac.

⁶ Lit. *from day to night* = in a dawn-to-dusk interval.

⁷ M uncertain; read *I am worn down*; cf. 1QIsa^a.

⁸ M *hung*, read *were exhausted* = *cried out*; cf. LXX.

⁹ M *Lord*, read יהוה; cf. 1QIsa^b.

¹⁰ M *distress*, read *contend*; conjectural emendation; cf. Gen 26:20.

¹¹ M *I will walk at a slow pace all my years*, read *All my sleep fled*; cf. Syriac, Arabic.

¹²⁻¹² M unintelligible. The translation is based on a hypothetical reconstruction.

¹³ Lit. *Ely*, a short form of *Elyon*, a divine name.

¹⁴ M *loved me*, read *kept back*; cf. Vulgate.

¹⁵ M *hope*, read *recount*; conjectural emendation.

¹⁶ M *for*; read *El*, a divine name; conjectural emendation.

¹⁷ M *for*; read *El*, a divine name; cf. 1QIsa^a; 1QIsa^b.

¹⁸ M *my songs*; read *songs*; conjectural emendation.