

Isaiah 1:21-31

A New Translation

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The translation offered below is designed to enhance appreciation of the poetry and prosody of the underlying Hebrew text. Unobtrusive differences in the use of blank spacing define stress units, versets, lines, strophes, and stanzas. An introduction to the building blocks of ancient Hebrew verse is offered elsewhere.¹

A verset of two to three stress units is given a line of its own, with stress units marked by differences in the use of spacing. A line of two to three versets is set off from contiguous lines by an empty line of minimal dimensions. Minimal use of capitalization and punctuation is intentional. By and large, capitalization marks the onset of a stanza as defined in the general rule.²

The goal has been to furnish a global approximation of the poetry and prosody of the Hebrew text, even if the results are necessarily piecemeal. The rich texture of the original cannot be mapped onto a translation except in fits and starts. I sometimes retain, in imitation of the Hebrew, examples of enallage, chiasm, ellipsis, and inversion which perforce result in a less idiomatic rendering.

¹ See the writer's "Regularities in Ancient Hebrew Verse: An Overview," and supporting essays, at www.ancienthebrewpoetry.typepad.com.

² The general rule: ancient Hebrew verse is confined within a system of "twos and threes": two to three "stress units" make up a "verset"; two to three versets a poetic "line"; two to three lines a "strophe"; two to three strophes a "stanza"; two to three stanzas a "section"; and two to three sections a poem, or an extensive section thereof.

Isaiah 1:21-31

How she has become a whore
the town of integrity
“full of justice
law and order lodge in her”
but now murderers!
your silver has become slag
your drink diluted with water
your rulers are rogues
associates of thieves
all of them love a bribe
and chase after gifts
the orphan they do not defend
the widow’s cause
does not come before them

Herewith the word of the Lord
of Yahweh of Armies
of the Bull of Israel

oh I'll be satisfied of my foes
I'll be avenged of my enemies
and turn my hand against you

I'll smelt away your slag in a crucible
remove all your dross

and restore your judges as before
your counselors as of yore

after that they'll call you
"citadel of justice
town of integrity"

Zion shall be redeemed in the judgment
her repentant ones in an act of justice
but he'll break rebels
and sinners alike
those who take leave of Yahweh will perish

and you'll be ashamed of the trees
in which you delighted

you will blanch because of the gardens
you preferred

and you'll compare to a tree
of withering leaf

to a garden in which water
is lacking

and the mighty tree will be like tinder
its owner like a spark

both will burn together
with none to douse