

Isaiah 1:2-20

A New Translation

John F. Hobbins

www.ancienthebrewpoetry.typepad.com

The translation offered below is designed to enhance appreciation of the poetry and prosody of the underlying Hebrew text. 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. Differences in the use of blank spacing define stress units, versets, lines, strophes, and stanzas. 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. I sometimes retain, in imitation of the Hebrew, examples of enallage, chiasm, ellipsis, and inversion which perforce result in a less idiomatic rendering.

My thanks to David Curzon for going over a draft of this translation, and for helping me to avoid unnecessary archaisms and awkward expressions.

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.

Hear o heavens
give ear o earth
Yahweh has spoken
sons I reared and raised
and they rebelled against me

an ox knows its owner
an ass its master's pen
Israel does not know
my people do not consider

O errant nation
iniquity laden people
brood of evildoers
miscreant sons
who abandoned Yahweh
despised Israel's Holy One
turned back

where shall one strike you again?
you go on turning away
the whole head is injured
the whole heart sick
from sole of foot to head
no soundness in it
sore and gash
raw wound
not drained
not dressed
not softened with oil

Your land a desolation
your cities consumed with fire
your soil in your sight
of which foreigners eat
a desolation like a storm's devastation
and lovely Zion left over
like a hut in a vineyard
like a lean-to in a melon patch
the city preserved

if Yahweh of Armies
had not left us a remnant
soon we'd have been like Sodom
to Gomorrah compare

Hear the word of Yahweh
notables of Sodom
give ear to our God's instruction
people of Gomorrah
what to me are your many slaughters
says Yahweh
I am sated with whole-burnt rams
fat of fed beasts
blood of bullocks
lambs and he-goats
I'm not pleased
that you come to see my face
who asked this from your hand
that you trample my courts
Do not continue
bringing offerings
its savor is false
to me an abomination
new moon and sabbath
calling of convocation
I cannot abide
assembled evil your new moons
your seasons my soul hates
they're a burden to me
I'm weary of bearing them
and when you spread out your hands
I'll hide my eyes from you
no matter how much you pray
I will not listen
your hands are covered with blood

Wash get clean
remove your evil doings
from before my eyes
cease dealing harshly
practice dealing kindly
seek after justice
correct the violent
defend the fatherless
plead for the widow

Come let's settle the case
says Yahweh
though your sins be like scarlet robes
they'll turn white as snow
though red as crimson dye
they'll become like fleece
if you acquiesce and obey
you'll eat of the good of the land
if you refuse and revolt
you'll be eaten by the sword
Yahweh's mouth has spoken