

On Translating from Hebrew to English

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I'm not an expert in translation theory, but experience has taught me a couple of things. First of all, a mastery of both source and target languages is the fundamental prerequisite for the work of translation. By mastery, I mean the ability to engage in simultaneous translation from one language to the other, unaided by a dictionary.

The mechanisms by which this skill level is attained are various. Mastery of a modern language usually requires full immersion of 8 to 16 months. Or bilingualism may be accomplished in fits and spurts, as is in the case of my children, whose mother tongue (literally) is Italian, but whose primary language outside of the home is English. Their Italian is latent most of the time, but comes out fine and continues to improve in an Italian-only environment, as when in Italy with *cugini e amici*.

In the case of an ancient language, a degree of bilingualism can be attained and should be attempted. Trained in the old school, I did all the English-to-Hebrew exercises in Jacob Weingreen's *Classical Hebrew Composition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966 [1959]) under the tutelage of Menahem Mansoor. Those of us who did this sweat bullets along the way, but I know of no better way to attain bilingualism than by moving from source to target language and back again. Want to get good at translating from Hebrew to English? Learn to translate from English to Hebrew.

The other way was listening to audio tapes of portions of the Tanakh until I got to the point where I could understand what was being said both word-for-word and in terms of Gestalt perception, such that I could translate from the tape simultaneously. It is also an excellent way to memorize Scripture. Thanks to Gary Martin of the Academy of Ancient Languages, anyone may do this today from the comfort of their home. Go [here](#).

Mansoor liked to tell his students the story of an atheist he knew in Israel who knew all the psalms by heart. It was an effective way of needling pious Christians into doing likewise. He gave me a pocket edition of the Psalms in Hebrew as a gift, and clearly expected me to memorize as many of the Psalms as I could. He also liked to tell us the story (perhaps apocryphal) of the first students of divinity at Yale (or was it Harvard?) who were required

to memorize Psalm 23 in Hebrew so that, if and when they made it to heaven, they could chime in with the angels.

Is it possible to translate well from Hebrew to English without foundations of the kind just mentioned? It certainly is. One of the finest translations of the Song of Songs available is that of Peter Jay (*The Song of Songs* [London: Anvil Press, 1975]). According to his preface, he doesn't know Hebrew, but depended on commentaries, other translations, and the help of friends with a mastery of Hebrew. To be sure, Jay knows many languages very well. One might say that he knows language with a capital "L" as well as almost anyone. That, combined with a strong lyrical sense, makes his work of translation superb.

1. *The Use of Pre-existing Translations*

Bible translations have a zillion different uses. If one is looking for a Bible that is going to be intelligible to people with limited competence in high register English and/or language and themes specific to biblical literature, there are a number of translations out there that seek to meet that need. Many of them, for obvious reasons, originate with a missionary purpose in mind. They are useful for other purposes as well. They tend to avoid calques in the translation of expressions. Time-worn calques, like the expression "the skin of his teeth," will be understandable to a literate individual, but many calques, time-worn or newly coined, lead to misunderstanding without careful explanation.

If the question is, what kind of Bible is suitable for nurturing a particular confessional community, it will of course depend on the community. It is no accident that there are Jewish translations, Catholic translations, and Protestant translations, in each case, conservative and less so. For someone who attempts, as I do, to translate in deliberate lack of imitation of the way the history of interpretation refracted and bent the original to non-original ends, a comparison with tradition-bound translations is for that very reason extremely useful.

2. *The Use of Dictionaries*

If the question is, what kind of translation is most likely to respect the nuances of the original, it is natural to expect that the translations offered in a Hebrew-to-German or Hebrew-to-English dictionary will fit the bill. That's because philological research in ancient Hebrew literature has by and large been the purview of German-speaking and English-speaking scholars in the last two centuries. (The more important work of philologists who write in

modern Hebrew is also published in English or German, though not always.) Dictionary translations are word-generic rather than (usually) passage-specific. For that very reason they make a useful check on attempts to understand the meaning of a word based on context alone.

Dictionaries of ancient Hebrew have their share of idiosyncrasies. It is important to remember that there is nothing sacred about the subdivisions of meaning a given dictionary offers.

Three Hebrew-to-English dictionaries deserve mention. Each has its strengths and weaknesses. The first is classic and is based on the work of the great lexicographer Wilhelm Gesenius. The second is based on a revision of Koehler-Baumgartner, another formidable tradition of lexicography. The last is the most innovative, with full coverage of ancient Hebrew inscriptions, DSS vocabulary, and proposals by comparative philologists. It is not yet finished.

(1) Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (repr. of 1906 edition; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004). Known as BDB. Order from [Eisenbrauns](#).

(2) M. E. J. Richardson, ed., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament: Study Edition. Vols. 1-2* (translation and revision of HALAT [see below]; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2002 [1994-1999]). Known as HALOT. Order from [Eisenbrauns](#).

(3) David J. A. Clines, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 1993-). Known as DCH. Order from [Eisenbrauns](#).

- Volume 1, *Alef* (1993)
- Volume 2, *Bet-Vav* (1995)
- Volume 3, *Zayin-Teth* (1996)
- Volume 4, *Yodh-Lamedh* (1998)
- Volume 5, *Mem-Nun* (2001)
- Volume 6, *Samekh-Pe* (2007, forthcoming)

Two Hebrew-to-German dictionaries deserve mention. The first exists in an English edition, much revised, and not always for the better. The second, like BDB, is based on the work of Gesenius. It is beautifully done, but not yet finished.

(4) Walter Baumgartner, Ludwig Koehler, and Johann Jakob Stamm, eds., *Hebräisches und aramäisches Lexicon zum Alten Testament* (5 vols; Leiden: Brill, 1967-1997). Order from [Brill](#). Known as HALAT.

(5) Rudolf Meyer and Herbert Donner, *Hebräisches und aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament* (18th ed.; Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1987-). Order from [Springer](#). Abbreviation: HAT.

1. Lieferung, *alef - gimel* (1987)
2. Lieferung, *dalet - yod* (1995)
3. Lieferung, *kaf - mem* (2005)
4. Lieferung, *nun-pe* (2007)

An excellent Hebrew-to-Spanish dictionary deserves mention. In some ways, this dictionary beats all the others! It is impossible not to learn new things from reading its entries carefully.

(6) Luis Alonso Schökel et al, *Diccionario bíblico hebreo-español* (ed. Víctor Morla y Vicente; Madrid: Editorial Trotta, ²1999 [1994]). Order from [Distribuciones Librería de Habla Hispana](#). Abbreviation: DBHE.

A Hebrew-to-Hebrew dictionary deserves note. It is incorporated into a concordance of the Hebrew Bible. Use of this dictionary will significantly improve one's competence in ancient Hebrew. The author attempts to gloss ancient Hebrew words with other ancient Hebrew words as much as possible.

(7) Abraham Even-Shoshan, *A New Concordance of the Old Testament Using the Hebrew and Aramaic Text* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000). A serviceable earlier edition may be purchased from www.judaicapress.com. Abbreviation: NCOT.

3. *Translations and Culture*

And what should one expect if one has come up with a translation that is transparent to the original to a greater degree than previous versions? Will it be widely adopted? Probably not. There are good reasons for this.

Translations become a part of who people are. Once that happens, it may be important first of all just to stand back and watch in awe. When I was a pastor in Pachino and Scicli on the island of Sicily (I'm an ordained pastor of the Waldensian church of Italy), for a time I attended a Pentecostal prayer meeting in which there was much extemporaneous prayer. I would struggle sometimes to follow the conversation between prayer because people naturally slipped into the dialect of that neck of the woods. It is different enough from standard Italian to be unintelligible to those who did not grow up on the island and in that part of the island. But when people prayed, they prayed in the language of the Diodati, an august Italian translation as old as

the King James, and just as full of archaisms. They prayed in it with a wonderfully distinct pronunciation, and I could understand every word of it.

For Sicilian Pentecostals, Italian is just as much a second language as it is for me (born in the USA). The language of the Diodati is the language they think appropriate to address God in. I would never wish them to think otherwise.¹

¹ To be sure, well-educated Sicilians are letting their native dialect go by the wayside through lack of use. If they are well-educated Pentecostals, they are likely to be embarrassed by the practice of having a prayer-language consisting of four centuries old, high register Italian. Too often a modern education is, in effect, an exercise in repression.