

Bible Translation

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Translating the Old Testament: Learning from the King James Bible

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Abstract: The Hebrew word “dabar” is translated in the King James Bible by no fewer than 82 different English words. This article explores how and why it is translated like this, considering some of the issues at stake in Bible translation more generally, and with the King James Bible, in particular. It examines more closely six ways in which translation decisions either affect interpretation or reveal the translation process. It draws out implications for translators, readers, and for evaluating the KJB.

Keywords: King James Bible; Hebrew; Old Testament; translation; *dabar*

Introduction

The year 2011 marked the 400th anniversary of the production of the King James Bible (KJB). This anniversary generated lecture series, exhibitions, books, and programmes on radio and television, all wanting to mark or exploit this significant milestone. This article has no intention of rehearsing the history of the making of that Bible, whether in terms of the people involved or in terms of its indebtedness to previous translations. Further, it will not trace the subsequent influence of the Bible, whether on literature, on art, on the English language or even on Bible translations. Rather, it will look at an area that received relatively little attention, the King James Bible’s translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, and it will do so from an unusual angle. The aim is to highlight some of the perennial questions for Bible translators and readers of translations by looking resolutely at one significant illustrative translation. Important subsidiary aims include to evaluate the KJB translation and to demonstrate that attention to translational issues yields exegetical benefits. The first part will outline the angle of approach; the second will look at some of the most important general considerations in Bible translation; the third will look at considerations specific to the KJB; the fourth will look at six discrete features of translation; the final part will highlight significant implications.¹

A Surprising Unity

When I introduced this subject in a lecture in Oxford, the audience was given one minute to identify what unites the following words: • Word, • Acts, • Chronicles, • Whit, • Errand, • Questions, • Business, • Book, • Promise, • Hurt, • Lying, • Case, • Signs, • Provision, • Duty, • Power, • Language, • Iniquities. The only suggestions offered were, “Bullet points,” “In English,” and “Capitalized.” Astonishment followed the realization that every one of them is a rendering in the KJB of the Hebrew word *dābār* (pronounced “da-var”) in the singular or the plural.

¹ I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for insightful comments, criticisms and corrections of an earlier version. Any infelicities that remain are my own. All English Bible quotations are from the KJB unless otherwise indicated.

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The word *dābār* itself occurs 1442 times in the Old Testament, according to Even-Shoshan's concordance.² The Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament gives the figure as 1440.³ My own tally is 1439 occurrences, in 1290 verses. Variations in the total depend on a number of factors: a different consonantal text is proposed (e.g. Ps 105:27); a different pointing of the existing consonants is preferred, thus making the noun into a verb (*vdbr*; e.g. Job 4:2) or into a different noun (*deber*; Ps 41:8); there is an error (e.g. Strong's on Jer 38:14). The precise total count does not matter so much as the astonishing variety of words used to translate *dābār*. If singular and plural (e.g. "word / words") are counted together as one rendering, no fewer than 82 different words have been used in the KJB to translate *dābār*:

KJB rendering	#occurrences	e.g.
word/words	809	Ezek 33:23
thing/things	230	2 Sam 11:18
matter/matters	62	1 Sam 10:16
acts	51	1 Kgs 11:41
chronicles	38	2 Kgs 16:19
saying/sayings	25	Jonah 4:2
nothing (with <i>lō</i> , 'not')	23	Amos 3:7
commandment	20	2 Chr 31:5
manner	15	Gen 18:25
because (with 'al)	9	Ps 45:4
said	8	Esth 5:5
business	8	Deut 24:5
cause/causes	8	Exod 22:9
speech	7	2 Sam 14:20
book	7	1 Chr 29:29
promise	6	1 Kgs 8:56
answer (verb) (with <i>šûb</i>)	6	1 Kgs 12:6
rate	5	2 Chr 8:13
answer (noun) (with <i>šûb</i>)	5	2 Chr 10:9
deeds	5	2 Sam 12:14
tidings	4	Exod 33:4
portion	4	Neh 12:47
message	3	Judg 3:20
errand	3	Gen 24:33
sentence	3	Deut 17:9
concerning	3	2 Sam 18:5
sake(s) (with 'al)	3	Gen 20:11
not ought (=nothing)	2	Exod 5:11
advice	2	Judg 20:7
affair / affairs	2	Ps 112:5
request	2	2 Sam 14:15
any	2	Deut 13:11
questions	2	1 Kgs 10:3
report	2	1 Kgs 10:6
task/tasks	2	Exod 5:13

² Even-Shoshan, *Concordance*, 251–56.

³ G. Gerleman, "דָּבָר *dābār* word," *TLOT* 1:326.

KJB rendering	#occurrences	e.g.
spoken	2	1 Kgs 18:24
work	2	1 Chr 16:37
duty	2	2 Chr 8:14
talk (n)	2	Job 15:3
lies (with <i>šeqer</i> / <i>kāzāb</i>)	2	Prov 29:12; 30:8
dealings	1	1 Sam 2:23
sort (=fashion)	1	Neh 6:4
wherewith	1	Ps 119:42
what	1	Ezra 8:17
due (n)	1	Neh 11:23
counsel	1	Num 31:16
spakest	1	Jer 48:27
decree	1	2 Chr 30:5
whit	1	1 Sam 3:18
that	1	Neh 5:9
eloquent	1	Exod 4:10
whatsoever (thing)	1	Num 23:3
thought	1	Deut 15:9
song	1	Ps 137:3
signs	1	Ps 105:27
iniquities	1	Ps 65:3
evilfavouredness (with <i>raʿ</i>)	1	Deut 17:1
case	1	Deut 19:4
some (= any)(uncleanness/nakedness)	1	Deut 24:1
lying (with <i>šeqer</i>)	1	Prov 13:5
thus	1	Judg 8:1
done (with <i>hāyā</i>)	1	1 Sam 4:16
so (with <i>zeh</i>)	1	1 Sam 9:21
care ⁴	1	1 Sam 10:2
it (proleptic)	1	1 Sam 18:26
hurt	1	1 Sam 20:21
communication	1	2 Sam 3:17
oracle	1	2 Sam 16:23
conferred (there were words)	1	1 Kgs 1:7
provision	1	Dan 1:5
somewhat to say	1	1 Kgs 2:14
parts	1	1 Kgs 6:38
reason	1	1 Kgs 9:15
(no) harm	1	2 Kgs 4:41
judgement	1	2 Chr 19:6
effect	1	Ezek 12:23
purpose	1	Neh 8:4
to commune	1	Job 4:2
power	1	Job 41:12
language	1	Ps 19:3
disease	1	Ps 41:8
for (with <i>ʿal</i>)	1	Ps 79:9
untranslated (ellipsis)	1	Jdg 8:3

⁴ KJB preserves the formal structure of the Hebrew, where *dābār* (pl. cstr.) followed by “asses” is the object of the verb.

By far the most common translation equivalents for *dābār* are “word(s)” or “thing(s)”, with ten translation equivalents accounting for around 90% of the occurrences of *dābār*. At the same time, there is a striking variety.⁵ This variety needs evaluating.

General Considerations in Translating

Any translation needs to take account of characteristics of words, how words “work” and where meaning is found. The following four are the most significant factors to consider with reference to word meanings.

Semantic Range

Words in a given language do not have an irreducible core or centre of meaning (though they tend towards this if they are a specialised word or technical term). Rather, words have a domain or field of meaning, covering a range of referents. There is no reason to expect that a word in one language should have a (near) identical domain to a word in a different language, even though the word in the target language may be the best translation equivalent in some contexts.

The Hebrew word *dābār* has a broad semantic domain, as is evident from the different lexicons that analyse it. The oldest Hebrew lexicon in current use, Brown-Driver-Briggs (BDB), gives four main areas that indicate the extent of this domain: the first is “speech, discourse, saying, word...the sum of that which is spoken”, found only when *dābār* is in the singular; the second is that of “saying, utterance, sentence...a section of discourse”; the third is “word, words”; the fourth is “matter, affair, thing about which one speaks.”⁶

The most recent Hebrew Dictionary, *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, unsurprisingly has very similar categories. It too breaks down the semantic domain of *dābār* into four: “word, speech”; “thing”; “way, manner”; “reason, cause.” Within the first category, “word, speech,” it notes that sometimes the sense is “more specific”: report (e.g. 2 Sam 11:18); request (e.g. 2 Sam 14:15); promise (e.g. 1 Kgs 2:4); command (e.g. Esth 1:12); commission (e.g. Gen 24:33); thought (e.g. Deut 15:9); theme (e.g. Psa 45:1 [Heb 2]); sentence, verdict (e.g. Deut 17:9). It may be predicated of human beings (e.g. Exod 8:9), of Yhwh (e.g. Gen 15:1), of the heavens (Ps 19:3 [Heb 4]) or of wisdom (e.g. Prov 1:23). The second category, “thing” is further subdivided into four subdomains, “matter, affair, cause, case” (e.g. Gen 24:9);⁷ “deed,” whether of humans (e.g. 1 Kgs 11:41) or of Yhwh (e.g. 2 Kgs 20:9); “event” (e.g. Deut 4:32); “something, anything” (e.g. Gen 18:14). The third category is “way, manner” (e.g. Deut 15:2), and the final one is “reason, cause” (e.g. 1 Kgs 9:15).

The different categorisations above show that the boundaries between categories are somewhat blurred.⁸

There is no one English word that comes close to covering the same domain as *dābār*. Focusing on the possible translation equivalents in English runs the risk of forcing a distinction that may be present in the target language, but absent in the original.⁹ Nonetheless, it is the job of the translator to find such equivalents.

⁵ Compare Gerald Hammond’s comment (“English Translations,” 653), “with common words there is great consistency of translation.”

⁶ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 182–84.

⁷ Included here is “because of,” *al dābar*.

⁸ Other analyses of *dābār* include G. Gerleman, “*dābār* word,” *TLOT* 1:325–332; J. Bergman, et al., “*dābhar*; *dābhār*,” *TDOT* 3:84–125; Frank R. Ames, “*dābar*,” *NIDOTTE* 1:912–915.

⁹ Note, for example, Levison’s criticism (concerning *rūah*, “spirit”) of the “artificial, anachronistic, and decidedly unnecessary division that serves only to obscure the relationship that exists in Israelite literature between God’s initial gift of the spirit and a subsequent endowment of the spirit” (Levison, *Filled*, 11–12).

Denotation and Connotation

The semantic “load” that a word brings to a particular utterance consists not just what it refers to, or denotes, but also the emotional freight that it conveys, or what it connotes. The connotation of a word is rooted in its historical and geographical context. It has a *when* and a *where*. The distinctive connotations of a word are most clearly seen in metaphors. Cotterell gives the example of “worm” in Ps 22:6: “I am a worm, and not a man.”¹⁰ It is not difficult to know what the referent of “worm” is, what it denotes. But the connotation of “worm,” the mental response elicited by that word at that time in that place, is less straightforward. He notes that in one Semitic language, Amharic, the connotation of “worm” is not something weak and despised, but something strong and powerful. A translation should take account of the connotations of the word in the original and in the target language. Although *dābār* brings little emotional freight, its ability to refer both to a “word” and something more concrete raises challenges for the translator, as we shall see below on Judges 3.

Collocation and Idiom

A third factor alongside “semantic domains” and “words and referents” is collocation and idiom. When rendering a word from one language in another language, an important consideration is the relation between that word and those surrounding it. There are two facets to this. First, there is the question of syntactical connections. No word exists on its own, but it always is in syntactical (i.e. grammatical) relationship with other words around it. The technical word for this group is *collocation*, and a word’s relationship with those around is its *syntagmatic* relationship. A word does not “mean” something in isolation, but is part of a collocation that is used to convey meaning, and the possibilities for translation of that word are constrained by the words to which it is syntagmatically related. Secondly, there is the question of idiom. It is sometimes the case that a particular collocation of words forms an idiom. Meaning is not to be found in words on their own, but in words within their collocation, within the wider social context of meaning.

Though an individual word, *dābār* occurs in particular collocations a significant number of times. These constrain the possible array of ways in which it may be rendered in English. For example, *dābār* can sometimes be modified by the adjectives “small” (*qāṭōn*) or “great” (*gādōl*).¹¹ In English, these adjectives modify “thing” much more naturally than they do “word,” especially where “do” or “know” is also present (1 Sam 20:2; 1 Sam 22:15). Further, on occasion *dābār* (sg.) follows the preposition ‘*al* and is bound to the word following, forming a prepositional phrase such as “because of,” “concerning.”¹² The possibilities for translation of *dābār* are limited by the collocation.

Words and Referents

A word in one language does not “mean” a word in another language. *dābār* does not “mean” word. Rather, *dābār* in Hebrew is sometimes used, along with some other words, to refer to what people say. In English, “word(s)” is similarly used to refer to what people say, but other words may also be used. Translation is not about rendering individual words in one language with individual words in another, as if it were solving a puzzle. C.S. Lewis captures what is at issue here well, as he talks about learning ancient Greek:

The great gain was that I very soon became able to understand a great deal without (even mentally) translating it; I was beginning to think in Greek. That is the great Rubicon to cross in learning any language. Those in whom the Greek word lives only while they are hunting for it in the lexicon, and who then substitute the English word for it, are not reading Greek at all; they are only solving a puzzle. The very formula, “*Naus* means a ship,” is wrong. *Naus* and *ship* both mean a thing,

¹⁰ Peter Cotterell, “Linguistics, Meaning, Semantics and Discourse Analysis,” *NIDOTTE* 1:151.

¹¹ 1 Sam 20:2; 22:15; 25:36; 2 Kgs 5:13.

¹² Gen 12:17; 20:11,18; 43:18; Exod 8:8; Num 17:14; 25:18; 31:16; Deut 22:24; 23:5; 2 Sam 13:22; 18:5; 1 Chr 10:13; 22:8; Ps 45:5; 79:9; Prov 29:12.

they do not mean one another. Behind *Naus*, and behind *navis* or *naca*, we want to have a picture of a dark, slender mass with sail or oars, climbing the ridges, with no officious English word intruding.¹³

Summary

Any translation needs to take account of these four factors: semantic domains, the combination of denotation and connotation, the particular collocation in which a given word finds itself, and how words refer.

Considerations Specific to the King James Bible Translation

When considering someone else's translation, it is vital to understand what the translators set out to do, what were their qualities, and what the process looked like. Before turning to the different illustrative examples from the KJB's translation, it is important to pause and reflect on some factors distinctive to the KJB that will impact our assessment. Some of these arise from the rules given to the translators or to the stated policy decisions of the translators. Some arise from an awareness of the translation process itself.

The translation of the KJB took place from 1604-1611, at the instigation of James I. Six different committees, based in Oxford, Cambridge and Westminster, were given different portions of the Old and New Testaments and the Apocrypha to translate. The significant roles given to the Dean of Westminster, who as a royal peculiar reported directly to the monarch, and to the regius (i.e. royally appointed) professors in Oxford and Cambridge helped ensure that the king's wishes were paramount.¹⁴ The effusive dedicatory preface highlights the King's significance.¹⁵ In comparing William Tyndale's translation, which lies behind 87% of the KJB, with the KJB, Wright shrewdly observes, "Tyndale was translating with radical intent. King James's appointed scholars were translating— or rather, editing and adapting Tyndale, the Bishops' Bible, and the rest— with stabilizing intent."¹⁶ A clear brief of what he required was produced. These were rules given to each of the groups by Richard Bancroft, Bishop of London.¹⁷ The degree to which such rules were in fact followed has been debated. Daniell lauds the work of Ward Allen in adducing "evidence of meticulous carrying out of instructions."¹⁸ Norton thinks they "were not as literally and uniformly followed as has been imagined."¹⁹ Nonetheless, it is still possible to speak of "the multilayered work of consultation, comparison, revision and creation that characterises the translation of the KJB."²⁰ There were around fifty men involved, with three groups for the Old Testament, two for the New, and one for the Apocrypha. Although most modern editions omit to print the lengthy preface to the published version, *The Translators to the Reader*, written by Miles Smith, later Bishop of Gloucester, it gives a fascinating insight into the rationale and process of translation.²¹ Taken together with the translators' rules, a number of features should be highlighted.

¹³ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*, 141.

¹⁴ Campbell, *Bible*, 38–39.

¹⁵ Given the variety of editions of the "epistle dedicatory" in different editions of the KJB, a convenient reference point is the version in Bray, *Translating the Bible*, 201–3.

¹⁶ Wright, "The Monarchs and the Message," 313.

¹⁷ The list is transcribed in Pollard, *Records of the English Bible: The Documents Relating to the Translation and Publication of the Bible in English, 1525–1611*, 53–55. For the full list, see Lloyd Jones, Moore, and Reid, "Materials and Methods," 88–89. The list is also found, with comments and discussion, in Norton, *Short History*, 86–90.

¹⁸ Daniell, *Bible in English*, 439.

¹⁹ Norton, *Textual History*, 27.

²⁰ Lloyd Jones, Moore, and Reid, "Materials and Methods," 107.

²¹ Smith, along with Thomas Bilson, Bishop of Winchester, oversaw the closing phases of the process of translation (Lloyd Jones, Moore, and Reid, "Materials and Methods," 92). Although available in many places, the source for quotations in this article is Bray, *Translating the Bible*, 203–35. For an exposition (rather than a critical analysis) of the principles and priorities found in the preface, and a comparison with subsequent prefaces, see Burridge, "Priorities, Principles and Prefaces".

The Translation Was Not *De Novo*

As the preface declared, the translation was not about making a “new” one, or “a bad one a good one,” but “a good one better,” producing “out of many good ones, one principal good one.”²² This was a case of standing on the shoulders of giants who preceded them.²³ Although it was permissible for the translators to work with other translations (“out of many good ones”), such as the Geneva Bible of 1560 (rule 14), rule 1 specified that it was the Bishops’ Bible (“a good one”) that was “to be followed, and as little altered as the Truth of the original will permit.”²⁴ The Bishops’ Bible was the 1602 edition, of which forty unbound copies were made available to the translators by Robert Barker, the king’s printer.²⁵ The KJB’s indebtedness to this version is apparent from the fact that “the KJB of 1611 reproduces peculiarities of the Bishops’ Bible, some of which are found only in the 1602 printings.”²⁶

The obvious implication when considering a translation is the degree to which it is indebted to earlier ones. It needs to be asked whether a translation is a *de novo* production, produced in dialogue with others, or wholly dependent on the translations of others as sources.²⁷ Inevitably, working from a base will mean a tendency to preserve what is found in that base.

Word Choice Was Both Conservative and Flexible

These might at first glance seem incompatible, but they are not. Rule 3 of the brief specified that the traditional ecclesiastical words (such as “church”) were to be preferred to the more recent reformed ones (such as “congregation”).²⁸ Under the same general frame, rule 4 stated that “when a word hath diverse significations, that to be kept which hath been most commonly used by the most of the Ancient Fathers, being agreeable to the propriety of the place, and the Analogy of Faith.”²⁹

This conservatism needs to be set alongside the preface’s stated desire for variety when rendering a word. While the translators recognised that words may have different senses,³⁰ they were keen to use a variety of English translation equivalents for a Hebrew or Greek word, even when it had the same sense. They knew that this had invited opprobrium before, but they defended it on a number of grounds: the preservation of the same word when it had the same sense would “favour more of curiosity than wisdom” and “would breed scorn in the atheist” rather “than bring profit to the godly reader”;³¹ further, they feared the accusation of unfairness, being “charged (by scoffers) with some unequal dealing toward a great number of good English words” by privileging and retaining certain words;³² they noted that God used “divers words, in his Holy Writ, and indifferently for one thing in nature,”³³ so they were really following God’s example. The KJB was translated to be heard more than read, and the translators’ concern was that

²² Bray, *Translating the Bible*, 228.

²³ McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 176–78.

²⁴ For the explicit linking of the different Bibles to these phrases, see Norton, *Short History*, 7.

²⁵ Norton, *Short History*, 94.

²⁶ Norton, *Textual History*, 35. Norton gives the example of the variations in the writing of the Hebrew name, ‘*ayyālôn*, always “Aialon” in the 1568 Bishops’ Bible, but variously “Aialon”, “Aialon” and “Aijalon” in both the 1602 Bishops’ Bible and in the 1611 KJB. Note also “That the KJB was printed from an annotated Bishops’ Bible—possibly from Bod 1602 [a manuscript in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, which was Bib. Eng. 1602 b.1 and is now Arch. A b.18]—is almost certain from the presence of the peculiarities and errors that come directly from the printed 1602 text” (Norton, *Short History*, 106). This edition, like ones that preceded it, “differ[ed] markedly from the 1568 original” (Norton, *Textual History*, 6).

²⁷ This final approach, exemplified by Coverdale’s Bible (1535), was a “false direction” in the drafting of the KJB (Norton, *Short History*, 18).

²⁸ A clear political decision to hinder Puritan interpretations. Cf. Norton, *Short History*, 87.

²⁹ Norton, *Short History*, 87.

³⁰ “... for, there be some words that be not of the same sense everywhere” (Bray, *Translating the Bible*, 233).

³¹ Bray, *Translating the Bible*, 233. Some (e.g., Norton, *Short History*, 115) read “savour” rather than “favour.”

³² Bray, *Translating the Bible*, 233.

³³ *Ibid.*

“it may be understood even of the very vulgar.”³⁴ In short, they asked “For is the kingdom of God become words or syllables? Why should we be in bondage to them if we may be free, use one precisely when we may use another no less fit, as commodiously?”³⁵

Factors affecting word choice are relevant when considering any translation. The preservation of “church” in the KJB is an important reminder that translations arise in social settings for a particular purpose. There is a *who*, a *where*, a *when*, and a *why*? Those instigating translation may want to include certain possible interpretations and exclude others. King James 1, who sponsored the KJB, was keen to avoid Puritan readings and to eliminate marginal interpretative (as opposed to textual) notes that could have undermined his authority. Issues of gender in translation are a clear modern parallel. In similar fashion, the justification of variety in word choice has modern analogies. Translators expect, and often receive, significant opprobrium. They have an eye not just to the Christian reader, but to the wider world. Further, it is possible to take issue with the explanations the KJB translators give. The concern for fairness is curious and dubious. However, these explanations show that a translation is inevitably rooted in theology and linguistics.

Great Care Was Taken in Translation

There are a number of factors that point in this direction. Some are to do with the people, others to do with the process. Most of the points that follow arise from the preface’s statements, which are then evaluated. Together, it is clear that the translation was done carefully.³⁶

The Translators Were Good Hebraists

The preface declares they came “learned, not to learn.”³⁷ This was not about learning on the job: “to learn and practise together, is neither commendable for the workman nor safe for the work.”³⁸ For the Old Testament, competence in Hebrew is essential. That is not to deny that translating some parts caused significant problem (e.g., Job 14:2).³⁹ But contemporary scholarship recognises their expertise.⁴⁰ In contrast to the almost total absence of such men one hundred years previously, they *already* were Hebraists of note, willing to follow (some) rabbinic exegesis.⁴¹ Although possibly the best Hebraist of the day, the “combative” Hugh Broughton, was not included,⁴² nonetheless “those gifted in Hebrew among the translators are almost too many to number.”⁴³

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 244.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 233.

³⁶ Note in this regard the “five model practices” that Burke (“Vital Aspects,” xiv-xvi) identifies: (1) Collaborative translation by teams with a variety of skills and perspectives; (2) Preparation of guidelines (rules) for the project prior to its inception; (3) Use of a multilevel draft review process; (4) Providing a preface to the translation; (5) Use of marginal notes to indicate textual decisions. For a fuller exposition of the preface and translation characteristics, see Burridge, “Priorities, Principles and Prefaces”.

³⁷ Bray, *Translating the Bible*, 229.

³⁸ *Ibid.* This is itself a quotation from Gregory of Nazianzus.

³⁹ Clines, “KJV Translation of the Old Testament,” 248.

⁴⁰ E.g., Norton, *Textual History*; Norton, “KJV at 400”.

⁴¹ Lloyd Jones, *Discovery of Hebrew*. For the rise of Christian Hebraism, see Burnett, *Christian Hebraism*.

⁴² Daniell, *Bible in English*, 437. Norton (*Textual History*, 5 n. 2) describes him as “notoriously intransigent.”

⁴³ Lloyd Jones, Moore, and Reid, “Materials and Methods,” 94.

The Translators Were Devout Men

They were marked by humility, “greater in other men’s eyes than in their own” who “sought the truth rather than their own praise,”⁴⁴ and who were dependent and trusting not in their own wisdom and knowledge, but in their God. The preface’s praise may be overstated (though hardly rivalling the sycophantic dedication to King James I⁴⁵), but presumably this attitude meant the translators were not desperate to make a name for themselves or to leave a distinctive stamp upon the translation.

The Translators Worked Collaboratively in Appropriately Sized Companies

The preface notes they were “not too many, lest one should trouble another; and yet many, lest many things haply might escape them.”⁴⁶ The making of a translation by a large group of scholars subdivided into companies who reviewed each others’ work was “innovative,” and contrasted with the Bishops’ Bible, where individual scholars were responsible for the different books.⁴⁷ The major precedent was the Septuagint.⁴⁸

The Translation Was from the Original Languages

This might seem an obvious point, but Latin had been the dominant Bible language in the church of the Middle Ages. Returning to the Hebrew and the Greek, part of the general trend *ad fontes* (“to the sources”) that characterised the humanist intellectual quest at that time, was justified because these were “the tongues wherein God was pleased to speak to his church by his prophets and apostles.”⁴⁹ The lack of mention of the texts from which to translate was a “major omission” in the rules.⁵⁰ But the issue of available manuscripts is less significant for translating the Old Testament than for the New, since Old Testament translators were using the Masoretic text.⁵¹

The Translation Was Done in Dialogue with the Best of Scholarship of the Day

The preface declares, “Neither did we think [it too] much to consult the translators or commentators, Chaldee, Hebrew, Syrian, Greek, or Latin, no nor the Spanish, French, Italian, or Dutch.”⁵² In the first printing of Hosea 6:5, *ḥāṣabṭî* is rendered “shewed”; in later editions it appears as “hewed,” presumably because “shewed” was regarded as an accidental error to be corrected. Norton observes, though, how Bod 1602 reveals that “shewed” was an intentional decision by translators (“cut down” is struck through and “shewed” is written) and argues that this reading is plausible in the light of Targum Jonathan.⁵³

⁴⁴ Bray, *Translating the Bible*, 229.

⁴⁵ For which, see Bray, *Translating the Bible*, 201–3.

⁴⁶ Though there were, of course, some different views and personalities represented on the committees.

⁴⁷ Norton, *Textual History*, 10. That is not to say that all translation was done as a group. The recent discovery of Samuel Ward’s work on 1 Esdras in the Apocrypha shows both that he worked as an individual, since the notes are only in his hand, and that it was revised, since not all his work finds its way into the KJB. See Miller, “Fruit of Good Labours”.

⁴⁸ Norton, *Textual History*, 10–11. The Geneva Bible of 1560 was “the first truly collaborative English version,” “the work of a dozen or so Protestant scholars living in exile” (Norton, *Short History*, 19).

⁴⁹ Bray, *Translating the Bible*, 230.

⁵⁰ Norton, *Short History*, 86.

⁵¹ Cf. Hurtado, “King James Bible,” 486–89; Burridge, “Priorities, Principles and Prefaces,” 205–6, 218–19. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has shaped more recent translations, though.

⁵² Bray, *Translating the Bible*, 230. Chaldee is Aramaic; Dutch is German.

⁵³ Norton, *Textual History*, 38–40.

The Translation Was Done Painstakingly, with Frequent Revision

It was not done in hurried fashion, for they did not “disdain to revise that which we had done, and to bring back to the anvil that which we had hammered.”⁵⁴ This is not to say that no errors were made in translation, as, for example “the Lord your God” in 1 Kgs 8:61, rather than “the Lord our God” for *yhwh* [’ădōnāy] ’ēlōhēnū.⁵⁵ Evidence for the painstaking process includes MS 98, until very recently the only extant manuscript of the first stage of the work, on the New Testament Epistles. The manuscript has 1769 verses; in these, there are no fewer than 4131 revisions of the 1602 Bishops’ Bible.⁵⁶ A second piece of evidence is a copy of the notes made by the Reverend John Bois on the general meeting’s discussion of the translation of the Epistles and Revelation. Although some questions remain about the extent and nature of the notes, nonetheless they do show “how the translators thought.”⁵⁷ A further illustration of “how thoroughly they worked” is that the 250 variants found in the 1602 Bishops’ Bible and retained in the 1611 KJB comprise only 16% of the “contentious” variants of the 1602 Bible, the version that they were to follow.⁵⁸

Summary

There are a number of implications for evaluating the KJB. We should be cautious before attributing a translational decision either to poor Hebrew or lack of care. Further, while variety may have been a stated aim, there may be other reasons for variations in translation. These include the versions to which the translators were indebted, the possibility that the translations are due to different groups or that the translators believed that the word signified something different in the various places. At the same time, knowledge of Hebrew, and of linguistics and semantics in particular, has advanced over the last four hundred years. A proper historical awareness should temper both criticism and unrealistic veneration.

These considerations also have significant ramifications when considering any translation, whether ancient or modern. Questions include: Who is translating it, for whom, why, and when? What are the theological and linguistic foundations? As for the people involved, how competent are they, particularly with the original languages? What is their attitude? As for the process, how collaborative is it? How does the translation relate to previous translations? How hurried has the translation been?

Case Studies and Their Significance

We now turn our attention to the King James Bible’s translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, and to six case studies. Each illustrates a point that has ongoing relevance and impact for contemporary Bible translation and reading. Since, as we noted above, the translation is not *de novo*, some of the case studies below may have occurred in previous translations. But, as Norton points out, “it would be wrong to assume from the very few changes in the passage that are original to the KJV that the translators did very little.”⁵⁹ Both Bois’s notes and evidence from Bod 1602 indicate that significant discussion and work went into the process.⁶⁰ So evidence of the KJB translators’ approach is evident not just in original readings, but also in the readings that they have adopted from previous translations.

⁵⁴ See further Daniell, *Bible in English*, 442–46.

⁵⁵ Norton, *Textual History*, 36.

⁵⁶ Allen, *Translating the New Testament Epistles*, xxi.

⁵⁷ Norton, *Short History*, 101.

⁵⁸ Norton, *Textual History*, 36.

⁵⁹ Norton, “KJV at 400,” 10.

⁶⁰ Norton, “KJV at 400,” 10–12.

The Decision Not to Preserve in Translation the Repetition of a Word in the Source Text

When a translator encounters more than one occurrence of a particular word in Hebrew, there arises a question. Should the translator preserve that repetition in the target language? Robert Alter commends the KJB precisely *for* the preservation of key-words in contrast to most modern translations.⁶¹ An English reader, when made aware of variation, can be puzzled by the failure to do so. There are places where *dābār* is present twice (or more) in the same verse or verses in the Hebrew original, and is not represented with the same word in English. How significant these instances are depends partly on whether *dābār* has the same referent, partly on whether the author and/or text places weight on the choice of *dābār* such that a specific point is being made, and partly on the other translations from which the translators drew.

One instance where the referent is similar, but there seems little weight placed upon the two instances of *dābār*, is found in the summaries of the reigns of various kings. There, the KJB renders the plural of *dābār* sometimes with “acts” and sometimes with “chronicles”: “The rest of all the acts (*dābār*, pl.) of Asa, and all his might, and all that he did, and the cities which he built, are they not written in the book of the chronicles (*dābār*, pl.) of the kings of Judah? Nevertheless in the time of his old age he was diseased in his feet” (1 Kgs 15:23). This pattern is not new, but is found in the Geneva Bible (the Bishops’ Bible has “words” and “chronicles”).⁶²

However, in some places, the decision by the KJB not to reflect the double occurrence of *dābār* means that something significant is lost in translation. In Ps 119:41-42, the psalmist declares,

“41Let thy mercies come also unto me, O LORD,
even thy salvation, according to thy word (*’imrā*).
42So shall I have wherewith (*dābār*) to answer him that reproacheth me:
for I trust in thy word (*dābār*).”

The Hebrew of v. 42 contains an intimate connection between trusting in Yhwh’s *dābār* and having a *dābār* to answer the one who reproaches, a connection that is severed by the KJB rendering.⁶³ Further, this connection is not a feature of the distinctive semantic domain of *dābār*, but is easily captured in English.

In Ps 103:20, the psalmist calls on the angelic beings, Yhwh’s messengers, to bless Yhwh:

“Bless the LORD, ye his angels,
that excel in strength, that do his commandments (*dābār*, sg.),
hearkening unto the voice of his word (*dābār*, sg.).”

The KJB follows both the Geneva Bible and the Bishops’ Bible in rendering the first occurrence of *dābār* with the English word, “commandment,” but, unlike both the Geneva Bible and the Bishops’ Bible, effectively treats the first *dābār* as plural, “commandments.” This is the only occurrence in the KJB of the singular of *dābār* being rendered with “commandments.” The decision is probably a combination of indebtedness, following the injunction to stick closely to the Bishops’ Bible, and interpretation, making a connection between the ten “commandments” (*dābār*, pl.; cf. Deut 4:13) and the Yhwh’s *dābār*. The result is that the correspondence between obedience, “doing” the Yhwh’s *dābār*, in the second colon and listening to, “hearkening,” *that same dābār* in the third colon is not as obvious. Again, the variety represented in the translation is not required by the differing domains of *dābār* and its translation equivalents.

The final case we shall look at appears superficially to be the same as those preceding. However, the referent of *dābār* differs, so the KJB is constrained by the inherent challenge of translation when the domain of *dābār* differs from that of its translation equivalents.

⁶¹ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 93.

⁶² Note that the KJB does not always follow this pattern (“acts ... chronicles”). In 1 Kgs 11:41, KJB has, like the Bishops’ Bible, “words ... words”; the Geneva Bible has “words ... acts.”

⁶³ Cf. Goldingay, *Psalms*, 3:400.

In 1 Kgs 12:24, Shemaiah, the man of God, warns Rehoboam against fighting those who have rejected him as king:

“Thus saith the LORD, Ye shall not go up, nor fight against your brethren the children of Israel: return every man to his house; for this thing (*dābār*) is from me. They hearkened therefore to the word (*dābār*) of the LORD, and returned to depart, according to the word (*dābār*) of the LORD.”

The first referent of *dābār* is clearly the whole turn of events until this point, encompassing Rehoboam’s listening to the posturing machismo of his peers through to the crowning of Jeroboam as king (cf. v. 15). The other two occurrences in the verse clearly speak of the prophetic word spoken at that moment by Shemaiah. The variation in the translation of *dābār* is understandable and, from one point of view, desirable, because the referent is different. However, something is lost in translation. In these chapters of Kings, it is the word of Yhwh, especially that spoken by the prophets, that dominates and governs both the portrayal of history and its outworking. It is not without reason that these books form part of the Former *Prophets* in the Hebrew canon. As the kingdom splits and the inexorable slide towards exile is documented, the writer makes it plain to his exilic audience that nothing has happened apart from Yhwh’s word. It is in this context that Shemaiah speaks of the turn of events, governed by Yhwh’s will, as this *dābār*. The connection between the “thing” (turn of events governed by Yhwh’s word) and Shemaiah’s prophetic word is lost in translation. It can be argued that it is necessarily so, idiomatically.⁶⁴ The translators faced a dilemma which defies a solution: *dābār* has a different semantic domain to any translation equivalent. No one English word could fit each occurrence adequately.

The decision of a translator not to preserve repetition may be the product of different factors. It may be more or less desirable, depending on those factors. In 1 Kgs 12:24, the choice is between awkward English or lost connections. Elsewhere, (e.g., Ps 119:41-42), the KJB translation decision breaks a connection in part because of the stricture to follow a previous translation and in part because of another interpretative connection. The result is the concealing of a significant component of meaning.

To generalise from this, when reading in translation, it is important to be aware that repetition in the original may not be preserved. There may be good reasons for this, so the translation should not automatically be excoriated. Finding ways to access repetition in the original is an important skill for the exegete who does not know the source language.

The Danger of Losing Something by the Particular Translation Decision

This is a variant of the first point above, though here it is the individual translation decision that is in view, rather than the variety when more than one occurrence is present. In some places, the particular translation decision adopted by the KJB means that something important in the Hebrew is lost. This is not making the point that translation inevitably entails a loss, though that is of course true.⁶⁵ Rather, it is making the point that an already recognised and appropriate alternative is preferable, but for some reason has not been chosen by the KJB translators. No translation is immune from such decisions.

In Deuteronomy 32:46-47, Moses has just finished reciting the song that he is to teach the people (32:1-43). As he is about to die, he exhorts the gathered throng: “46Set your hearts unto all the words (*dābār*, pl.) which I testify among you this day, which ye shall command your children to observe to do, all the words (*dābār*, pl.) of this law. 47For it is not a vain thing (*dābār*) for you; because it is your life: and through this thing (*dābār*) ye shall prolong *your* days in the land, whither ye go over Jordan to possess it.”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Though it should be noted that some scholars have argued that words were intrinsically powerful to the Hebrew mindset. Klaus Koch (*Prophets*, 2:94) comments, “in the prophet’s view the dynamic aspect of the word, which calls forth historical events, is more important than the dianoetic information it contains.” This has been effectively refuted in Thiselton, “Supposed Power of Words”.

⁶⁵ No wonder the Italians have the proverb, “traduttore, traditore”, “translator, traitor.”

⁶⁶ Note that the italics were originally to de-emphasise words that had no equivalent in the original, but now curiously they have the opposite effect. See Norton, *Textual History*, 49.

The decision to translate *dābār* with “thing” consistently in verse 47 differs from both the Bishops’ Bible and the Geneva Bible (“word ... word”). This shift from “words” to “thing” can probably be explained by the presence of the plural “words” (*dabārīm*) in the previous two verses. It could be an instance of variety on the grounds of fairness, if the referent were thought to be the same, or a reasonable variant if what was signified was slightly different, as may be indicated by the masculine singular pronoun, *hū’* (“it”).

However the semantic domain of *dābār*, especially in the singular, includes that of wider discourse. Failing to translate *dābār* with “word,” preferring instead the rather vaguer “thing,” carries considerable cost. Deuteronomy as a whole has a very high theology of the “word” of Yhwh. Yhwh has not been seen, but is present by his word.⁶⁷ When Deuteronomy emphasises sight in 4:34–36, what is seen is Yhwh’s actions or his great fire. Where the focus is on experiencing Yhwh, it is hearing his voice *from heaven* (4:36a) or, strikingly, seeing a voice (4:12).⁶⁸ In other words, to engage with Yhwh is to engage with Yhwh’s word. It is through this *word* that they shall prolong their days, because it this *word* that is their life. To leave it as a “thing” precludes these lines of thought. They cannot easily believe or trust in a “thing.” Further, in Deuteronomy 30:14, part of a passage (vv. 11–14) that in many ways is close to the verse we are examining, the KJB renders *dābār* as “word”: “But the word (*dābār*) is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it.” Intriguingly, this loss is something introduced in the KJB. Other “drafts”⁶⁹ have “word” in both places.

Here, then, the translators of KJB have chosen not to adopt a translation that was found in the Bishops’ Bible and that is congruent with that found in the KJB of Deut 30:11–14. In so doing, they inhibit a way of understanding the text that is consonant with Deuteronomic theology.

Two more general points emerge from this. First, it is possible that a rule (e.g. Rule 1, follow the Bishops’ Bible) can stand in some tension with a translational aim (e.g., for variety). Secondly, a translational decision in one place may not be consistent with a decision made in a different context (here Deut 30:11–14); this decision may have exegetical implications. Attention to what is the best translation can foster wider exegetical and theological reflection.

The Danger of Giving False Trails

In some places in the KJB, the word used to translate *dābār* in a given verse (or verses) appears more times than *dābār* occurs in the Hebrew. The impression is then given to the reader that *dābār* occurs more times in the Hebrew than in fact it does. This runs the risk of suggesting a link to the reader or hearer where none is intended.

Sometimes this is an unproblematic by-product of English spelling and usage at the time. In Genesis 30:31, Jacob is in the process of negotiating with his father-in-law, Laban, hoping to achieve a favourable settlement before returning home with his two wives, Rachel and Leah. Laban asks Jacob what he should give Jacob, and Jacob, having devised a cunning plan, begins his proposal, “Thou shalt not give me any thing (*mā’ûmā*): if thou wilt do this thing (*dābār*) for me, I will again feed *and* keep thy flock...”.

The repetition of “thing” here is understandable. The Oxford English Dictionary observes that “anything” was always separated: “any thing.” This is reflected in the KJB, which on 113 occasions speaks of “any thing,” never “anything.” The second occurrence of “thing” in the KJB arises because of the collocation of *dābār* with the verb *‘āsā*, meaning “do” or “make.” It makes little sense in English to talk of “doing” a “word”, hence the translation “do this thing”.⁷⁰ The double repetition of “thing”, concealing the single occurrence of *dābār*, is due more to the rendering “any thing” than to the translation of *dābār*. The likelihood of a reader following a false trail is increased by the passing of time: the first “thing” may be

⁶⁷ Cf. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 115.

⁶⁸ Compare also Dt. 5:24 and Ex. 33:20.

⁶⁹ To use the term for English precursors to the KJB from Norton, *Short History*.

⁷⁰ It is a mistake to infer from the fact that *dābār* is used both for “word” and “thing” to draw conclusions about ancient Hebrew thought, whether about the power of words or the inseparability of “word” and “event”, as some have done, including von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:80–98; Rabinowitz, *A Witness Forever*. See especially Thiselton, “Supposed Power of Words”.

misunderstood, so the recurrence of “thing” may be overinterpreted. An interpreter needs to understand possible reasons for repetition rather than draw premature conclusions on its significance.

The situation in Psalm 119:41-42 (cited above) is different. Here, alongside the double presence in the Hebrew of *dābār* in v. 42, rendered only once by the same English word in the KJB, is the double presence of “word” in KJB across vv. 41-42, when the Hebrew words lying behind the two occurrences are different: *’imrâ* in v. 41; *dābār* in v. 42. This diminishes the involvement of the hearers (/singers/readers). In the Hebrew, hearers are invited to draw their own conclusions about the connection between the *’imrâ* that speaks of “salvation” (or “deliverance” or “victory”; *təšû‘â*) and the *dābār* in which the Psalmist trusts so that he has something to say. Establishing that link prematurely by use of the same English word constrains the hearers in their interpretation.

Students of a text should always bear in mind that a translation may render two different words in the source language by the same word in the target language. It is a mistake to draw premature conclusions from the repetition in the target language. For those translating, care is needed to avoid giving false trails and misleading the reader.

Handling Ambiguity and Aesthetic Repetition

Sometimes repetition in Hebrew is aesthetic; sometimes the usage of a word exploits its inherent ambiguity. These provide considerable challenges for the translator. One striking example where both are found is in Judges 3:19-20. Ehud, the left-handed Benjaminite, has returned alone to Ehud’s palace with a dagger concealed on his right thigh. The portly king grants him audience, and Ehud declares: “I have a secret errand (*dabar sēter*) unto thee, O king”; the king rashly banishes all his courtiers, and is left alone, seated in a “summer parlour.” Ehud speaks again, “I have a message from God (*dabar ’ēlōhīm*) unto thee.” Eglon gets up expectantly from his seat, to be greeted with a thrust from the dagger into his belly.

At least two points arise from the Hebrew and the KJB translation. First, the KJB captured the deliciously ambiguous Hebrew in a way that is not straightforward to replicate in contemporary English. The content of the secret is contingent on the ambiguity inherent in *dābār* and the differential knowledge of the king and the narrator’s audience. The king expects a “word,” because of the verbal connotations typical of *dābār*, while the book’s spellbound hearers know that something rather more substantial is in view. Strikingly the KJB’s rendering “errand” could denote then, as the Oxford English Dictionary notes, “a message, a verbal communication to be repeated to a third party,” “a going with a message or commission” and “the business on which one is sent; ... the object of a journey, a purpose, intention.” The initial sense of “errand” as a verbal message is now obsolete, so it initially appears that the KJB has failed to capture the ambiguity. No other English word in contemporary use has a similar semantic domain, so the ambiguity in Hebrew is perhaps impossible to capture in contemporary English. An alternative translation that focuses on the king’s likely understanding might be “message”; one that focuses on the book’s hearers might be “something.” Neither of these alternatives is entirely adequate.

A second point to highlight is the shift that exists in Hebrew from *dabar sēter* (“word of secret” = “secret word”; v. 19) to *dabar ’ēlōhīm* (“word of/from God”; v. 20). The structure of the Hebrew phrases is the same, with only the second word changing. The king’s intrigue, already aroused by *dabar sēter*, is heightened still further by *dabar ’ēlōhīm*, prompting him to get up from his seat. Not only is it a secret *dābār*, so that he must banish his courtiers, it is a *dābār* from God, so it is very important.⁷¹ The KJB, however, does not preserve the aesthetic feel of identical structure, moving from “secret errand” to “message from God.” The different structure and the shift in rendition of *dābār* mean that the verbal and aesthetic connections are lost, so the subtlety of the shift remains hidden.

It is important for any reader to be aware that ambiguity (or particular connotations) which are present in the original language may well not be present in the target language (and vice-versa). It is also important to be aware that a translation dates; words change their meanings. There are more than 500 such words in

⁷¹ The phrase is used in 1 Sam 9:27 to refer to “the word of God” that Samuel has.

the KJB.⁷² On the subject of aesthetics, once discussion has moved to the feel of a language, it is harder to generalise. Most modern English translations work with “a secret message” and “a message from God,” a decision which preserves the repetition of *dābār*, “message,” but still loses something of the appeal that the parallel structuring provides.

Adapting to the Idiom and to Immediate Context

In places, the KJB translates idiomatically and flexibly, according to context. The point is not to draw attention to an unprecedented translation decision, nor is it to claim something for the translation that will necessarily gain universal approval. As should be apparent, it is easier to identify the challenges of translation than to arrive at a definitive translation. It is, though, to highlight something of the quality of the KJB translation, especially when set against the somewhat wooden principles that some modern scholarship finds enshrined in the KJB.

One example is the particular phrase *dabar-yôm bayômô*, “a word/thing of a day in its day” if taken word-for-word, rendered by BDB as “the task or portion of a day in its day, daily duty or due.” The phrase itself occurs in 11 places in 7 different books of the Old Testament. What is striking is how the KJB translates it, matching it to the precise nuance of the context, without being constrained by translating every word. On six occasions, the 1602 Bishops’ Bible is followed directly; sometimes the phrase is rendered differently, with the KJB smoothing infelicitous expression.

Verse	Context	KJB translation (1602 Bishops’ Bible)
Exod 5:13	the task of making bricks	<i>your</i> daily tasks (=)
Exod 5:19	the task of making bricks	of your daily task (=)
Exod 16:4	gathering manna	a certain rate every day (=)
Lev 23:37	the offerings for feast days of Yhwh	every thing upon his day (=)
1 Kgs 8:59	Solomon’s prayer, for Yhwh attention	at all times, as the matter shall require (=)
2 Kgs 25:30	King Jehoiachin’s daily allowance in Babylon	a daily rate for every day (every day a certain)
Ezra 3:4	daily offerings on return from exile	as the duty of every day required (day by day)
Neh 11:23	the singers’ portion	due for every day (every day)
Neh 12:47	Israel’s giving of the portion to singers + porters	every day his portion (=)
Jer 52:34	King Jehoiachin’s daily allowance in Babylon	every day a portion (every day a certain thing allowed to him)
Dan 1:5	the king’s allocation to potential servants	a daily provision (a daily provision every day)

The KJB illustrates here some important principles noted earlier. Idioms in the original need careful translating, where “word-for-word” is conspicuously inappropriate. The idiom in question brings with it a certain component of meaning, but how it should be rendered is flexible. The translation should be shaped by the particular context in which the word (or idiom) is found, even when this means that it is not rendered the same in every occurrence.

A Translation Decision Gives a Window into the Translation Process

Translators face an unenviable task, as the frequent defensiveness in the preface highlights. The outcome may be more or less acceptable to different groups. There is a further angle, though, on translation that merits study. Sometimes the decision to translate one way rather than another may reveal something about the translation process itself. This is particularly so when a phrase or idiom in Hebrew is found in more than one place, and is rendered differently in translation. This may, of course, be the work of the same person (or group of people, in the case of the KJB), whose translation has changed for stylistic reasons or

⁷² See the list in Burke, *Translation That Openeth the Window*, 243–58.

simply because of the passage of time.⁷³ It may, though, be indicative of a different group working on the translation of the texts in question, of a different individual within a group working on a particular chapter, or of inconsistent editing.

A comparison of the translation of 1 Kings 12 and 2 Chronicles 10 makes it very probable that different groups were involved in the translation of the different texts.⁷⁴ In 1 Kings 12, Rehoboam has headed to Shechem to be crowned king by all Israel. They urge him to treat them more gently than his father, Solomon. In vv. 6, 9, Rehoboam consults first the elders then the “lads” who have grown up with him.⁷⁵ The question that he asks of each group differs subtly:

’êk ’attem nô’āšîm ləhāšîb ’et-hā’ām hazzeh dābār (1 Kgs 12:6)

“How do ye advise that I may answer this people?” (KJB)

“What counsel give ye, that I may answer this people?” (1602 Bishops’ Bible)

māh ’attem nô’āšîm wənāšîb dābār ’et-hā’ām hazzeh (1 Kgs 12:9)

“What counsel give ye that we may answer this people?” (KJB)

“What counsel give ye, that we may answer this people?” (1602 Bishops’ Bible)

Two contrasts are evident in the Hebrew, reflected mostly in the KJB, beyond Rehoboam’s decision to relay to the “lads” the people’s complaint and to do so selectively. First, there is the shift from “How?” to “What?” While *’êk* may speak of content, the emphasis here seems more open to the manner. Rehoboam invites what he gets, a “crafted and crafty” reply.⁷⁶ The second contrast is the move from “that [I] may answer” to “that we may answer,” as Rehoboam demonstrates his foolish allegiance and ingratiates himself to the crude lads. The third contrast evident in the KJB, but not in the Hebrew (nor in the 1602 Bishops’ Bible, which has the noun “counsel” in both places), is the shift from the verb “advise” to the noun “counsel.”

This same account occurs, often verbatim, in 2 Chronicles 10. Comparisons between the Hebrew and the KJB translation, with an eye to the 1602 Bishops’ Bible, are instructive.

’êk ’attem nô’āšîm ləhāšîb lā’ām hazzeh dābār (2 Chr 10:6)

“What counsel give ye *me* to return answer to this people?” (KJB)

“What counsel give ye *me* to answer this people again?” (1602 Bishops’ Bible)

māh ’attem nô’āšîm wənāšîb dābār ’et-hā’ām hazzeh (2 Chr 10:9)

“What advice give ye that we may return answer to this people?” (KJB)

“What advice give ye that we may answer to this people?” (1602 Bishops’ Bible)

In the Hebrew, there is one tiny difference in 2 Chr 10:6 compared with 1 Kgs 12:6. Instead of “this people” being a second direct object of the verb, it is now an indirect object, introduced by the preposition *lā*. The Hebrew of 2 Chr 10:9 is identical to that of 1 Kgs 12:9. In the KJB, however, there are some significant differences in the translation. The “how” of 1 Kgs 12:6 has become “what” in 2 Chr 10:6; “advise” and “counsel” are exchanged, with the former becoming a noun due to the “what.” Most interesting for our discussion of *dābār* is the way in which the idiomatic phrase *šûb* (hip’il) + *dābār* is translated. In 1 Kgs 12, it is translated with a straightforward “answer” (whether I or we); in 2 Chr 10, it is translated with “return answer,” preserving more transparently the causative nature of the hip’il of *šûb* and the sense of “bring back, cause to return.”

⁷³ An intriguing example in this regard is the decision of the translators of Deuteronomy into Greek to switch from translating the Hebrew word for “gates” (*šā’arîm*) literally until Deut 12:12, in phrases with the preposition *b* (“in, on”) while from 12:15 onwards to translate with *polis*, almost always in the plural. See McCarthy, *Deuteronomy*, 86*. A striking exception is the “among you” (*en soi*) of Deut 5:14 in the Decalogue.

⁷⁴ Documentary evidence of the scope of work of the different groups corroborates the analysis here. Part of the first Westminster group led by Lancelot Andrewes worked on 1 Kings, while the first Cambridge group, led by Edward Lively, worked on 2 Chronicles. See Lloyd Jones, Moore, and Reid, “Materials and Methods,” 90–91.

⁷⁵ The rendering of *yālādîm* as “lads” reflects the biting irony of the narrator, who refers to these younger advisers in a way rarely used of adults and reports their advice which is both crude and full of bravado.

⁷⁶ Walsh, *1 Kings*, 162.

The case for the involvement of different groups is given further impetus when two other “drafts” of the KJB are compared. The Geneva Bible of 1560 renders this same phrase, *šûb* (hip‘il) + *dābār*: “that I may make an answer” (1 Kgs 12:6); “that we may answer” (1 Kgs 12:9); “that I may answer” (2 Chr 10:6); “that we may answer” (2 Chr 10:9). The 1602 Bishops’ Bible translates the phrase, “What counsel give ye” (1 Kgs 12:6, 9; 2 Chr 10:6) or “What advice give ye” (2 Chr 10:9). The phrase “return answer” found in 2 Chr 10:6, 9 in KJB does not have precedent in either the Geneva Bible nor the Bishops’ Bible, nor is it not found in the (near) identical passages in Kings. Another twist is that this phrase is not translated this way in other places where it occurs in Chronicles (1 Chr 21:12; 2 Chr 34:16, 28).

In some places, it is possible to discern the distinctive hand of an individual translator because of particular translation decisions. In particular, on occasions *dābār* is translated a particular way in a cluster. In 1 Samuel 11:4-6, messengers from the besieged city of Jabesh come to Gibeah, desperate for help. They are said to bring “tidings” (*dābār*, pl.) to the people that Saul overhears. Three times the plural of *dābār* is translated as “tidings.” Apart from one instance in Exodus (33:4, *dābār* sg.), there are no other instances of “tidings” for *dābār* in the Old Testament.⁷⁷ This might be because the particular collocation (with messengers, *mal’āk* and the verb cognate with *dābār*, *vdb̄r*) and the denotation/connotation make a distinctive translation equivalent preferable. However, other instances where these occur do not yield the translation “tidings” for *dābār* (pl.) (2 Sam 11:19; cf. Deut 2:26; Jdg 2:4; Zech 1:13). It seems plausible that we are encountering a mode of expression peculiar to an individual translator.⁷⁸

Two implications should be drawn out from these observations. First, in any translation, even with an editorial committee, there may not be complete consistency. It is important not to read too much theological import into variations. Secondly, the line of argument used here can also be applied (cautiously) to discerning different hands in the Greek translation of the Old Testament and in the Hebrew Old Testament.

Implications

Evaluating the KJB

A number of scholars who have commented on the KJB translation of the Old Testament are critical, from the perspective of modern linguistics, of the translation philosophy. Naudé writes of the translation of the KJB and of other translations from “the Third Great Age” of Bible translation from 1500-1960:

In the process of translation there was a noticeable adherence to the word for word philosophy of translation and to the pristine vocabulary and style. The products of translation were characterized by a desire for the greatest possible transmission of the forms and structure of the source text, both at the macro- and micro-level. The pragmatic functions of the source text received scant attention.⁷⁹

Norton strikingly observes, while it is normally imagined that a translation (carrying across) is “from there to here,” the KJB is different: “it carries the reader from here to there and from now to then. By inviting the reader to see the original behind the English it makes us feel as if we are readers of the Hebrew and the Greek.” In short, “the KJV teaches its readers Hebrew.”⁸⁰

While there can be no doubt about KJB’s general literalness of translation, the KJB’s translation of *dābār* does not fit neatly within this. Both the variety of translations of *dābār* and, indeed, the variety of translations even for the same collocation, show that something more linguistically sophisticated is going on.

⁷⁷ Though “tidings” is used to translate other Hebrew words, including *šēma’* (e.g. Gen 29:13), *šəmū’â* (e.g. 2 Sam 4:4), *bəšōrâ* (e.g. 2 Sam 18:27; cf. the cognate verb *vbs̄r* in Isaiah 40:9).

⁷⁸ Cf. Miller, “Fruit of Good Labours”.

⁷⁹ Naudé, “On the Threshold,” 3.

⁸⁰ Norton, “KJV at 400,” 17.

At the same time, there are weaknesses with the translation. Beyond the monochrome style and tone, blurring the immense variety of the original,⁸¹ and the “sonorous” Latin character due to the Bishops’ Bible,⁸² some of the translation decisions surrounding *dābār* have hidden connections that should have been made, and have occasionally fostered connections that should not. Translation, though, is not an easy task.

The Task of Translating the Hebrew Old Testament

While rooted in one translation’s rendering of one word, this discussion highlights many generic questions for translators and readers of translations. Analysis of the particular illustrates the general.

There are questions of *purpose*: why this translation? Is it *de novo* or consciously standing in a tradition? Is it to be heard or read?

There are questions of *people*: for whom is the translation? Who is involved in the translation? What is their theological and linguistic understanding? What of their competence in the source, target and other relevant languages? What of their character?

There are questions of *provenance*: where has the translation been undertaken? When has it been carried out? What of the social setting?

There are questions of *process*: how many people are involved? How quickly is it done? How thoroughly is it revised? How consistent is it to the principles to which it aspires? To what extent are the distinctive marks of an individual (or group) preserved? What text are they translating?

There are question of *practice*: how are repetitions in the original handled in translation? How good are the specific translation decisions? Do the specific decisions lead the reader on false trails? How is ambiguity handled? What about aesthetics?

While the writers of the KJB preface insisted that translation was necessary and that the translation was indeed the word of God, knowledge of the original is of immense benefit.

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⁸¹ Hammond, “English Translations,” 650–51.

⁸² Daniell, *Bible in English*, 441.

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