

## Bible Translation

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# Translating Common Words

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**Abstract:** The *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, now complete, particularly helps one study common words, both ordinary words and words with theological freight. Such study suggests some myopia in how English translations render words such as *hesed*, *’āhēb*, *sānē*, *yārē*, *dāraś*, *biqqēš*, *’ebed*, *nāsā*, *yēšū’āh*, *mišpāt*, and *šēdāqāh*. The paper considers ways of translating some of these words and then considers Isaiah 56:1. This example also points to the usefulness of keeping the same translation for a particular word, to help readers perceive links within the text. There is thus a case for stepping back from recent practice associated with dynamic equivalence.

**Keywords:** Sheffield Dictionary; English translation; *yārē*; *’ebed*; *yēšū’āh*; *mišpāt*; *šēdāqāh*; Isaiah 56:1

The completion of the Sheffield *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* in 2011 was an important moment for biblical translation. One might admittedly add two qualifications to that statement. One is that the *Dictionary* itself is more interested in understanding words than in translating them. The other is that the *Dictionary* is not stopping just because it is complete; the editors have announced that they are now going back to the beginning in order to revise it. Nevertheless, the completion of Volume Eight is a landmark that invites some reflection.<sup>1</sup>

Thirty years ago, when I was first writing a commentary on a book of the Bible, my teenage son saw me working with a stack of existent commentaries and remarked, “So, you read all those commentaries and you make a précis of them and then you publish that as your commentary?” I hope it wasn’t so, but there is a danger in working in the way I was. Now, as I am writing a commentary on some of the Twelve Prophets, I have on my desk simply a copy of BHQ, the Jewish Publication Society Version with the Hebrew and the facing translation, a concordance, and a Hebrew dictionary. On a shelf just behind me are the Versions, and other dictionaries and reference works. Not far beyond those reference works is a raft of commentaries, but I read the latter at a subsequent stage of my work, to broaden my agenda and my insights, and to put me back on the right lines where necessary. But initially I write about what I myself find in the text that I’m working on.

I recall seeing an early volume of the *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* described as more like a concordance than a dictionary, and I especially value that aspect as I am seeking to discover what lies in a text. It helps me see how words are used and thus what they mean in contexts, and therefore how I might translate them. Again, when I heard David Clines originally introduce the dictionary project, I recall him telling us that the dictionary would focus more on common words than on uncommon and difficult ones, to which dictionaries commonly give much attention. That focus again means that the dictionary helps me see how words are used and what they mean in contexts.

The volumes of the dictionary were coming out as I was writing commentaries on Isaiah 40–66, and I spent considerable time working through the entries for many of the words in those chapters and thus

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discovering distinctive aspects of the words' usage. I found the listing of "synonyms" and "antonyms" useful in connection with identifying aspects of the usage of common words and words about whose general meaning there is little real doubt or difficulty or controversy. For instance, the list of synonyms for *bāḥar* (three words for desire and one for ask) clarified that when Yahweh describes Jacob as the one he chose (Isa 41:8) the verb is the language of love—it suggests not so much the choice of one person rather than another but the attachment of the chooser to the chosen. The way the *Dictionary* catalogs the various verbs that occur in connection with a particular noun has the same effect. For instance, the list of verbs used with *gal* (the *gal* that means "wave") suggests that *gallīm* are crashing, overwhelming waves, not gentle breakers—which was interesting background to the use of that word when Yahweh speaks of a flourishing of Israel that is like the *gallīm* of the sea (Isa 48:18).

The dictionary also helped me make up my mind about interpretive possibilities. For instance, its list of passages where *dibbēr* introduces direct speech confirmed my conviction that Isaiah 52:6 is not an instance of this usage. That is, in that verse Yahweh says, "I am the one who speaks; I am here," not "I am the one who says that I am here." The dictionary's treatment of *kēn*, and specifically its detailed account of the use of this word in noun clauses, confirmed a suspicion I had about the standard interpretation of the noun clause in Isaiah 52:14, where English versions have something like "so marred was his appearance"; this understanding implies a use of the word that is quite unusual.

In the course of writing those commentaries and of using the *Dictionary*, especially in connection with common words, I came to the conclusion that English translations evidence a kind of myopia and/or lethargy in rendering many common words that have more freight. I became particularly interested in English translations' rendering of words such as *hesed*, *'āhēb*, *sānē*, *yārē*, *dāraš*, *biqqēš*, *'ebed*, *nāsā*, *yēšū'āh*, *mišpāt*, and *šēdāqāh*.

Consideration of the way such words are translated raised at least two questions. A difficulty about some of them is that they have a spread of meanings in Hebrew that has seemed to require us to give them different translations in English in different contexts. For the Hebrew word *'ebed*, for instance, English translations commonly alternate between "slave" and "servant." For *'ebed*, Greek has *doulos* and *pais*, but also *diakonos*, *oiketēs*, and *therapōn*. It is tempting for an English-speaker to assume that *doulos* means "slave" rather than "servant" and thus to compare the distinction between *doulos* and *pais* with that between "slave" and "servant," but Septuagint usage does not suggest such a distinction. In Isaiah 40–66 the Septuagint uses both *pais* and *doulos* to describe Israel as Yahweh's *'ebed* and also to render other occurrences of *'ebed*. In turn, *pais* naturally also renders *na'ar*, the Hebrew word for a servant boy. The words *doulos* and *pais* may have different connotations,<sup>2</sup> but they are not equivalent to English "slave" and "servant" respectively.

In the Vulgate *servus* is the almost invariable rendering of *'ebed*, though the Vulgate occasionally uses *famulus* (especially to describe Moses as God's *'ebed*). In turn, the King James Version regularly renders *'ebed* "servant"; while it occasionally uses words such as "bondman," it never renders *'ebed* as "slave," and neither do the nineteenth-century revisions of the King James. The translation of *'ebed* as slave became common in translations from the Revised Standard Version onwards. Whatever the reason for this change, it is misleading. The *Oxford American Dictionary* defines a slave as a person who is the legal property of another and is forced to obey them. Hardly ever does that definition apply to an *'ebed*. The position of an *'ebed* was more like that of a servant, not least the English bond-servants who came to the Americas without paying for their passage, on the basis of serving a master there for a set number of years after their arrival. The Hebrew Bible does not describe the legal position or the experience of an *'ebed* as generally very like that of a slave, specifically not like the African slaves who came to the Americas on a different basis from the European bondservants, and who provide modern Western readers with their understanding of the word "slave."

Ironically, a converse point can be made about *yārē*. Whereas modern translations misleadingly treat *'ebed* as a word with two English equivalents, translations commonly treat *yārē* as a word with one English equivalent, and they are then misleading. For *yārē*, too, a translation tradition developed, in which the

<sup>2</sup> See van der Kooij, "Servant or Slave," and his references.

noun *yir'āh* commonly becomes *phobos* in the Septuagint, *timor* in the Vulgate, and “fear” in English. Every first-year-Hebrew student knows that *yārē'* means “fear”; except that this assumption is mistaken. The word may indeed denote fear, but it may denote something more like awe, both with God and with human beings as object. The default translation of *yir'at 'ēlōhīm* as “the fear of God” gives a misleading impression. The semantic range of *yārē'* and words of similar meaning is equivalent to that of at least two English words. Something similar is true of *yāda'*. Here the default translation is “know,” but the word’s implication is commonly something more like “acknowledge” or “recognize” and thus “heed.” The declaration about Cyrus in Isaiah 45:4-5 was not that he did not know Yahweh but that he did not acknowledge Yahweh. The nations’ destiny was not to “know that I am Yahweh” but “to acknowledge that I am Yahweh” (Isa 49:23). Likewise the problem with the Judahites (Isa 42:25) was not that they did not know that they had been set on fire by Yahweh. It was that they did not acknowledge it (see further Isa 41:20, 23, 26; 43:10, 19; 45:3, 6; 49:26; 52:6; 55:5).

For *yir'āh*, modern translations sometimes do use a word such as worship, which solves one problem but creates another. It is an example of the way translations have sometimes moved away from having a default rendering for each Hebrew word. It is also an aspect of a move away from word-for-word translation towards dynamic equivalence. Now something is always lost in translation, and difficult choices have to be made. One such choice relates to making the best possible sense of a sentence in itself and also representing the meaning that attaches to the sentence in the context of a paragraph and of a document and of related writings. Using different English translations for the same Hebrew word, as we sometimes must, can obscure significant links between passages that use the same Hebrew word, and thus obscure the meaning of an individual passage. In Jonah chapter 1, there is a sixfold recurrence of the verb *yārē'*, the adjective *yārē'*, and the noun *yir'āh*. One English version translates the root in four different ways, by the words fright, worship, terrified, and feared. This variation is in part understandable in the context, yet it obscures aspects of the chapter’s meaning.

A second difficulty with some of those common but freighted words is that they denote something for which we do not have an English word. *Ḥesed* and *šēdāqāh* are examples. From the Septuagint onwards, translations have commonly coped with this difficulty by fixing on one word that seemed as near-equivalent as possible. So *šēdāqāh* became *dikaiousunē*, and in the Vulgate *iustitia*, and in the King James Version “righteousness.” Another example of a tradition of translation thus developed, in which *dikaiousunē* and *iustitia* and “righteousness,” for instance, become “signs” for *šēdāqāh*, something like code expressions. Implicitly, when you see *dikaiousunē* or *iustitia* or “righteousness,” you need to think “Ah, this means *šēdāqāh*, and I know what *šēdāqāh* means.”

But of course most readers don’t operate that way and don’t know what *šēdāqāh* means, and can hardly be expected to do so. And the default translation “righteousness” is then systematically misleading. In modern English, at least, “righteousness” suggests personal holiness of life. While the Hebrew Bible is indeed concerned for personal holiness of life, *šēdāqāh* is not regularly the way the Hebrew Bible refers to it. Conversely, personal holiness of life is not regularly the connotation of *šēdāqāh*.

Similarly, *yēshū'āh* became *sōtēria* and then *salus* and then “salvation.” So every first-year Hebrew student knows that *yēshū'āh* means “salvation.” Except that this is another misleading assumption. The Oxford American Dictionary defines “salvation” as “deliverance from sin and its consequences, believed by Christians to be brought about by faith in Christ.” The definition accurately conveys the word’s meaning for the average reader of the Hebrew Bible in English. So the English Old Testament’s references to “salvation” are systematically misleading.

*Mišpāṭ* is a particularly complex example. The *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* gives *mišpāṭ* the basic meaning “judgment” and dedicates seven columns to that meaning. It then dedicates three columns to the meaning “justice,” four columns to the meaning “ordinance,” and three columns to some other meanings. In the Septuagint *mišpāṭ* is commonly rendered by *krisis*, in the Vulgate by *iudicium*, and in the King James Version by “judgment.” But after the Second World War “justice” came close to being the default translation of *mišpāṭ*. Now the noun *mišpāṭ* and the verb *šāpaṭ* essentially denote concrete actions, and in this sense translations such as “judgment” and “judge” fit, but they are too forensic or legal; the Hebrew words denote the exercise of power or authority, the making of decisions, the exercise of government. They are not

essentially legal words. But neither are they essentially ethical words, as the translation “justice” suggests. Ideally the actions they denote will be just, but it is entirely possible to *šāpaṭ* or to exercise *mišpāṭ* in an unjust way.

So why has *mišpāṭ* come to mean “justice”? My hermeneutic of suspicion says that it is because Christian readers like to feel enthusiastic about justice, so they like seeing the word “justice” in the Bible. And the Bible is indeed concerned about justice. But *mišpāṭ* is not especially the way it talks about justice. This fact links with a further difficulty. Moshe Weinfeld has rightly noted that the expression *mišpāṭ ūšēdāqāh* is the Hebrew equivalent to social justice,<sup>3</sup> but the implication is not that *mišpāṭ ūšēdāqāh* means what we mean by social justice. *Šēdāqāh* means something like doing the right thing by people to whom you have obligations—it is close to faithfulness. *Mišpāṭ* denotes the exercise of authority or government. So *mišpāṭ ūšēdāqāh* suggests the exercise of authority in a way that does right by people to whom we have obligations. Alasdair MacIntyre famously drew attention to a problem in discussing justice. Not merely do different groups within a society have different views of what is just. The very concept of justice differs between societies. MacIntyre noted that translating Homer’s word *dikē* by justice obscures the fact.<sup>4</sup> So does the translation of *mišpāṭ* by “justice.”

A recurrent issue in Christian translation of the Hebrew Bible reappears here. The Hebrew Bible often refers to the same realities or concepts as the New Testament and/or as Christian faith, but it uses different words for them. The Hebrew Bible talks about justice, righteousness, salvation, and the Messiah, but *mišpāṭ*, *šēdāqāh*, *yēshū‘āh*, and *māshīaḥ* are not its words for these ideas. Conversely, when the Hebrew Bible uses the words *mišpāṭ*, *šēdāqāh*, *yēshū‘āh*, or *māshīaḥ*, it is not referring to justice, righteousness, salvation, or the Messiah.

Isaiah 56:1 is my favorite illustration of a number of these issues.

נִמְרוּ מִשְׁפָּט  
וַעֲשׂוּ צְדָקָה  
כִּי קְרוֹבָה יְשׁוּעָתִי לְבוֹא  
וְצִדְקָתִי לְהִגָּלוֹת

In my understanding, Yahweh says: “Take care to implement the exercise of authority in a way that does right to those to whom you have obligations; because my act of deliverance whereby I do right for you is near to manifesting itself.” There is some ambiguity about the “because” in this exhortation, but that ambiguity is not my concern here. I am more concerned with the neat collocation of the two occurrences of *šēdāqāh*, and the link with *yēshū‘āh*. “You do the right thing by one another, says Yahweh, because I am doing the right thing by you.” In contrast, some standard translations render the verse as follows:

Act justly and do what is righteous,  
because my salvation is coming soon, and my righteousness will be revealed  
(Common English Bible)

Maintain justice and do what is right,  
for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed  
(New International Version)

Maintain justice, and do what is right,  
for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed  
(New Revised Standard Version)

<sup>3</sup> Moshe, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and the Ancient Near East*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?* 13-14.

Observe what is right and do what is just;  
 For soon My salvation shall come and My deliverance be revealed  
 (Jewish Publication Society Version)

The lines' significance depends on the double usage of *šēdāqāh* to refer to the community doing the right thing in light of people's mutual relationships, and Yahweh doing the right thing in light of his relationship with his people. The translation "righteousness" does not very effectively convey the meaning in either line. Translating the word in two different ways obscures part of the lines' logic. The translation "justice" does not convey the significance of *mišpāṭ*. And the introduction of "salvation" encourages Christian readers to misunderstand *yēshū'āh*.

My conclusion about the translation of common words with such freight is that there are some translations to avoid: "salvation" for *yēshū'āh*, "justice" for *mišpāṭ*, "righteousness" for *šēdāqāh*, and "slave" for *'ebed*. Something like "doing what's right" or even "faithfulness" may be as near as we can get to a default rendering for *šēdāqāh*. Something like decision-making or the exercise of authority or government seems as near as we can get to a default understanding of *mišpāṭ*. Deliverance is quite a satisfactory rendering of *yēshū'āh*. "Servant" will do for *'ebed*. Further, there are some standard translations that need nuancing, such as fear or awe for *yir'ah* and knowledge or acknowledgment for *da'at*.

Where it is possible to keep the same translation for a word, this practice helps to preserve links within passages and thus represent the actual meaning of individual sentences. To this end we need a step back from recent practice associated with dynamic equivalence, and the related awareness that meaning lies in contexts and sentences not just in individual words. In other words, there is something to be said for the notion of monosemy as opposed to polysemy. Monosemy is the semantic theory that a word has a univocal meaning, though this meaning is indeed then tailored to the context in which the word appears.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, there is something to be said for a return to the practice of sticking close to the way the Hebrew works (to word-for-word translation) rather than paraphrasing it, so people can get as close to the text as possible.

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<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Ben Lappenga for helping me to think through this issue: see now his *Paul's Language of Ζῆλος*.