

Bible Translation

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Mary Sidney's Translation of *ṣēdeq* as 'Just' rather than 'Righteous'

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Abstract: Mary Sidney's (1561-1621) interesting and entertaining free translations of the Psalms using lyric poetry forms prized by the Renaissance literary world highlight women's roles often glossed over by male translators. In addition, Mary Sidney chooses to translate Hebrew *ṣēdeq* as 'just' in contrast to the King James's 'righteous', perhaps reflecting her concern for community justice, while the king spiritualized the concept in order to protect his position and right to enforce royal wishes.

Keywords: Bible translation; women's translation; Psalms as poetry; ideology in Bible translation

Mary Sidney's (1561-1621) interesting and entertaining free translations of the Psalms using lyric poetry forms prized by the Renaissance literary world highlight women's roles often glossed over by male translators. For example, Psalm 68:11 reports that a large group or army, *ṣāḇāʾ*², of women messengers, *haməḇaśśārôt*, announce God's word of victory. The King James Bible, followed by most modern English translations, ignores the feminine ending: "The Lord gave the word: great [was] the company of those that published [it]". But, Mary Sidney translates: "There taught by thee in this triumphant song/ A virgin army did their voices try".

In addition, she chooses to translate Hebrew *ṣēdeq* as **just** in contrast to the King James's **righteous**. The following Psalm examples contrast Sidney's translation of *ṣēdeq* with the King James Version and, in some cases provide the 1560 Geneva Bible with its marginal notes. Their translations of Hebrew *ṣēdeq* are in bold font; in cases where righteous occurs as a translation of a different Hebrew word, it is written in normal font and sometimes its Hebrew source term is specified. As can be noted, these contexts reference the king, his throne, his kingdom, and his judgments in favor of the poor and the oppressed.

Psalm 45:4-7

Geneva Bible

⁴ And prosper with thy glory: ride upon the word of truth and of meekness **and of righteousness**: so thy right hand shall teach thee terrible things.

⁵ Thine arrows *are* sharp *to pierce* the heart of the King's enemies: *therefore* the people shall fall under thee.

⁶ Thy throne, O God, *is* forever and ever: the scepter of thy kingdom, *is* a scepter of righteousness [*mîšōr*].

⁷ Thou lovest **righteousness**, and hatest wickedness, because God, *even* thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows.

FOOTNOTES:

Psalm 45:4 He alludeth to them that ride in chariots in their triumphs, showing that the quiet state of a kingdom standeth in truth, meekness and **justice**, not in worldly pomp and vanity.

Psalm 45:6 Under this figure of this kingdom of **justice** is set forth the everlasting kingdom of Christ.

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King James Version

⁴ And in thy majesty ride prosperously because of truth and meekness [and] **righteousness**; and thy right hand shall teach thee terrible things.

⁵ Thine arrows [are] sharp in the heart of the king's enemies; [whereby] the people fall under thee.

⁶ Thy throne, O God, [is] for ever and ever: the sceptre of thy kingdom [is] a right [*mîšôr*] sceptre.

⁷ Thou lovest **righteousness**, and hatest wickedness: therefore God, thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows.

Sidney Psalter

‘Thy Honour’s sword gird to thy mighty side,
 O thou that dost all things in might excell:
 With glory prosper, on with triumph ride,
 Since **justice**, truth, and meekness with thee dwell.
 So that right hand of thine shall teaching tell
 Such things to thee as well may terror bring
 And terror such as never erst befell
 To mortal minds at sight of mortal king.
 ‘Sharp are thy shafts to cleave their hearts in twain
 Whose heads do cast thy conquests to withstand:
 Good cause to make the meaner people fain
 With willing hearts to undergo thy hand.
 Thy throne, O God, doth never-falling stand;
 Thy scepter, ensign of thy kingly might,
 To righteousness [*mîšôr*] is linked with such a band,
 That righteous [*mîšôr*] hand still holds thy sceptre right.
 ‘**Justice** in love, in hate thou holdest wrong,
 This makes that God, who so doth hate and love,
 Glad-making oil on thee hath flung,
 Which thee exalts thine equals far above.

Psalm 72:1-7

Geneva Bible

¹ Give thy judgments to the King, O God, and thy **righteousness** to the King’s son.

² *Then* shall he judge thy people in **righteousness**, and thy poor with equity.

³ The mountains, and the hills shall bring peace to the people by **justice**.

⁴ He shall judge the poor of the people: he shall save the children of the needy, and shall subdue the oppressor.

⁵ They shall fear thee as long as the sun and moon endureth, from generation to generation.

⁶ He shall come down like the rain upon the mown grass, *and* as the showers that water the earth.

⁷ In his days shall the **righteous** flourish, and abundance of peace *shall be* so long as the moon endureth.

FOOTNOTES:

Psalm 72:1 Endue the king with the Spirit of wisdom and **justice**, that he reign not as do the worldly tyrants.

Psalm 72:3 When **justice** reigneth, even the places most barren shall be enriched with thy blessings.

KJV

- ¹[A Psalm] for Solomon. Give the king thy judgments, O God, and thy **righteousness** unto the king's son.
²He shall judge thy people with **righteousness**, and thy poor with judgment.
³The mountains shall bring peace to the people, and the little hills, by **righteousness**.
⁴He shall judge the poor of the people, he shall save the children of the needy, and shall break in pieces the oppressor.
⁵They shall fear thee as long as the sun and moon endure, throughout all generations.
⁶He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass: as showers [that] water the earth.
⁷In his days shall the **righteous** flourish; and abundance of peace so long as the moon endureth.

Sidney Psalter

Teach the king's son, who king himself shall be,
 Thy judgements, Lord, thy **justice** make him learn:
 To rule thy realm as **justice** shall decree,
 And poor men's right in judgement to discern.
 Then fearless peace
 With rich increase
 The mountains proud shall fill:
 And **justice** shall
 Make plenty fall
 On every humble hill.

Make him the weak support, th'oppressed relieve,
 Supply the poor, the quarrel-pickers quail:
 So ageless ages shall thee reverence give,
 Till eyes of heav'n, the sun and moon, shall fail.
 And thou again
 Shalt blessings rain,
 Which down shall mildly flow,
 As show'rs thrown
 On meads new mown
 Whereby they freshly grow.
 During his rule the **just** shall aye be green...

Psalm 103:5-6

KJV

- ⁵Who satisfieth thy mouth with good [things; so that] thy youth is renewed like the eagle's.
⁶The LORD executeth **righteousness** and judgment for all that are oppressed.

Sidney Psalter

He doth thee still
 with flowing plenty fill:
 He eagle-like doth oft thy age renew.
 The Lord his right
 Unto the wrongéd wight

Doth ever yield:
And never cease to shield
With **justice** them, whom guile and fraud pursue.

Psalm 119 (2 of 12 occurrences)

KJV

⁷ I will praise thee with uprightness of heart, when I shall have learned thy **righteous** judgments.

⁶² At midnight I will rise to give thanks unto thee because of thy **righteous** judgments.

Sidney Psalter

Then I would worship thee sincerely,
When what thy **justice** bids severely.
Thou shouldst me teach:
I would no breach
Make of thy law to me betaken:
Oh, leave me not in whole forsaken.

Midnight's watch thy praises cause,
While that me from bed and rest
Thought of thy **just** judgements draws.
Fellowship and friendship's hest, ...

Psalm 58:1-2, 9-11

Geneva Bible

¹ Is it true? O congregation, speak ye **justly**? O sons of men judge ye uprightly?

² Yea, rather ye imagine mischief in *your* heart: your hands execute cruelty upon the earth.

⁹ As raw flesh before your pots feel *the fire* of thorns: *so* let them carry them away as with a whirlwind in *his* wrath.

¹⁰ The **righteous** shall rejoice when he seeth the vengeance; he shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked.

¹¹ And men shall say, Verily there is fruit for the **righteous**; doubtless there is a God that judgeth in the earth.

KJV

¹ Do ye indeed speak **righteousness**, O congregation? do ye judge uprightly, O ye sons of men?

² Yea, in heart ye work wickedness; ye weigh the violence of your hands in the earth.

⁹ Before your pots can feel the thorns, he shall take them away as with a whirlwind, both living, and in [his] wrath.

¹⁰ The **righteous** shall rejoice when he seeth the vengeance: he shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked.

¹¹ So that a man shall say, Verily [there is] a reward for the **righteous**: verily he is a God that judgeth in the earth.

Sidney Psalter

And call ye this to utter what is **just**,
 You that of justice hold the sov'reign throne?
 And call ye this to yield, O sons of dust,
 To wrongéd brethren every man his own?
 Oh, no: it is your long-malicious will
 Now to the world to make by practice known
 With whose oppression you the balance fill,
Just to yourselves, indiff'rent else to none.

Oh, let their brood, a brood of springing thorns,
 Be by untimely rooting overthrown
 Ere bushes waxed, they push with pricking horns,
 As fruits yet green are off by tempest blown.
 The good with gladness this revenge shall see,
 And bathe his feet in blood of wicked one,
 While all shall say, 'The **just** rewarded be:
 There is a God that carves to each his own.'

Psalm 94:14-23

KJV

- ¹⁴ For the LORD will not cast off his people, neither will he forsake his inheritance.
¹⁵ But judgment shall return unto **righteousness**: and all the upright in heart shall follow it.
¹⁶ Who will rise up for me against the evildoers? [or] who will stand up for me against the workers of iniquity?
¹⁷ Unless the LORD [had been] my help, my soul had almost dwelt in silence.
¹⁸ When I said, My foot slippeth; thy mercy, O LORD, held me up.
¹⁹ In the multitude of my thoughts within me thy comforts delight my soul.
²⁰ Shall the throne of iniquity have fellowship with thee, which frameth mischief by a law?
²¹ They gather themselves together against the soul of the **righteous**, and condemn the innocent blood.
²² But the LORD is my defence; and my God [is] the rock of my refuge.
²³ And he shall bring upon them their own iniquity, and shall cut them off in their own wickedness; [yea], the LORD our God shall cut them off.

Sidney Psalter

For sure the Lord his folk will not forsake,
 But ever prove to his possession true;
 Judgement again the course of **Justice** take,
 And all right hearts shall God their guide ensue.
 See, if you doubt: against the cankered crew,
 Those mischief-masters, who for me did stand?
 The Lord, none else, but for whose aiding hand,
 Silence by now had held my soul in mew:

But Lord, they goodness did me then uphold,
 'en when I said, 'Now, now I faint, I fall':
 And quailéd in mind-combats manifold
 Thy consolations did my joys recall.

Then what society hold'st thou at all,
 What friendship with the throne of misery?
 Which law pretends, intends but injury,
 And **justice** doth unjust vexation call?

To council where conspiréd caitiffs flock
 The **just** to slay, and faultless blood to spill?
 Oh, no: My God Jehovah is my rock,
 My rock of refuge, my defensive hill,
 He on their heads shall well repay their ill;
 Jehovah, lo, the God in whom we joy,
 Destroy them shall, shall them at once destroy;
 And what the mean? Their own malicious will.

The Meaning and Translation of *ṣēdeq*

ṣēdeq and its feminine synonym *ṣēdāqāh* as well as the adjective *ṣaddīq* are used of God and of people in a range of meanings, including forensic and market justice, right conduct, communal faithfulness, as well as the liberation of oppressed people so that they obtain their rights. *ṣēdeq* in the Hebrew Bible denotes a person meeting the obligations of a relationship in which the person participates.¹ In terms of the king or someone else in a place of authority, his “rightness” is judged according to the way in which power is exercised.² Especially when used in parallel with *mišpāt*, which means “just legal decision,” *ṣēdeq* refers to a king’s responsibility to ensure a just community. Paine’s record of the “learned men” who were King James’ translators indicates that they chose to use the word **righteous**, which meant “right-wise”, from the older English Bibles, because “The Lord our righteousness is the Lord our right-wiseness, a profound meaning which is but faintly in the Hebrew and the Greek. Thus in many cases the English added content as well as form.”³ Voth states that, in the early seventeenth century, “As far as can be determined, the meaning and usage of the term *righteousness* emphasized personal piety, individual holiness, and moral purity.”⁴ Since **righteous** connotes a religious and moral state of being of an individual, translating *ṣēdeq* as **righteous** minimizes its active, secular, communal components.⁵

The contrast between the King James Version’s translation of *ṣēdeq* and that of Mary Sidney is reflected in other European language standard translations. The Hebrew root *ṣdq* occurs 476 times in the Hebrew Bible. The masculine *ṣēdeq* is used 117 times; the feminine *ṣēdāqāh* appears 155 times. In the Luther German text **justice** (*gerechtigkeit*) occurs 306 times, in the French Nouvelle 380 times, in the Latin Vulgate over 400 times, and in the Spanish Reina Valera Bible, *justicia* occurs a total of 370 times,⁶ whereas the English word **justice** occurs only 28 times in the King James Old Testament, in those cases as the translation of a distinct Hebrew word, and does not occur anywhere in the New Testament as a translation of *dikaioynē*, which the Septuagint often translated for Hebrew *ṣēdeq*. Instead, the King James Version translates the Hebrew term *ṣēdeq* as **righteous**. English Bible versions continue to preserve this vocabulary choice up to modern times, except that Roman Catholic translations, beginning late in the sixteenth century, tend to translate *ṣēdeq*, *iusticia*, and *dikaioynē* as **justice** rather than the **righteousness** of Protestant tradition.⁷ Hebrew-English and Hebrew-Spanish dictionaries coincide with this trend; that is, Hebrew-English lexicons list

1 Omanson, “Righteousness”.

2 Bratcher, “Righteousness”.

3 Paine, “The Learned Men”, 92.

4 Voth, “Justice”, 334.

5 Voth, “Justice”, 329; Moore, “Doctrine”.

6 Voth, “Justice”, 324.

7 Moore, “Doctrine”.

the primary meaning of *ṣēdeq* as **righteous**, whereas Schöckel's Hebrew-Spanish dictionary has *justicia* as its primary meaning.⁸ *Justicia* in monolingual Spanish dictionaries is defined with phrases like "Moral principle that inclines to work and judge guided by the truth and giving to each one that which belongs to them", "law, reason, impartiality", and "that which should be done according to law or reason."⁹ In other words, *justicia* in Spanish does not have a wide range of meaning that includes the individual state of being that is suggested by the term **righteous** in English.

Mary Sidney chose to translate Hebrew *ṣēdeq* as **just**, reflecting not only the true connotation of the Hebrew, but perhaps also her concern for community justice, while the King James's translators may have spiritualized the concept with **righteous** in order to protect the king's position and right to enforce royal wishes. They did this in spite of the king's instruction to the translators: "The old ecclesiastical words to be kept" and "When a word hath divers significations, that to be kept which hath been most commonly used by most of the ancient fathers."¹⁰

James came to the throne in a time of political and religious turmoil, so his agenda was to unify everyone and quash sedition. The attempt to blow up the House of Lords to subvert the state and get rid of King James in 1605, followed by the hanging of the rebels, concerned the translators. One of them, John Overall, supported the divine right of kings in his convocation book of canons, but argued that if any revolt occurred and a new rule succeeded, people were obligated to obey it as having itself a new divine right. "To touchy James this was false doctrine. So he suppressed the whole book of canons, which came out only after 1688, when James II was forced to leave the country."¹¹

Most English people used the Geneva Bible in their homes; it was especially defended by followers of Knox and Calvin and the Puritans. However, James instructed his translation committee to follow the Bishops' Bible used in churches: "The ordinary Bible read in church, commonly called the Bishops' Bible, to be followed and as little altered as the truth of the original will permit. No marginal notes at all to be affixed, but only for the explanation of the Hebrew or Greek words, which cannot without some circumlocution be so briefly and fitly expressed in the text. Such quotations of places to be marginally set down as shall serve for the fit reference of one scripture to another."¹² The Geneva Bible had copious marginal notes, some of which were considered seditious because they endorsed the right to disobey a tyrant.¹³ According to Paine: "James's real reason for objecting to the Geneva Bible was rooted in his need to feel secure on his new throne. Some of the marginal notes in the Geneva version had wording which disturbed him: they seemed to scoff at kings. If the Bible threatened him, it must be changed."¹⁴ He wanted to avoid any pleas for social justice, societal change, or fairer laws. The translators, although bothered by James's struggles with the House of Commons over taxes and other social issues, wished to avoid raising political issues like Shakespeare's " 'Kings are earth's gods; in vice their law's their will, And if Jove stray, who dares say, Jove doth ill?' A touchy king might well dislike such questions, and for the progress of the Bible work it was little enough to assure a royal patron of his virtue and safety."¹⁵ The Geneva Bible translated *ṣēdeq* as **justice** twelve times more than the King James Version. By giving *ṣēdeq* a connotation of religious piety, individual holiness, and personal morality, James could please the Puritans without acceding to their wishes for societal change.¹⁶ The King James translators' decision has influenced western Christianity to emphasize individual piety and spirituality rather than the community responsibility implied by justice.

Mary Sidney may have known some Hebrew and Greek through her chaplain tutor, but primarily she used as sources the 1560 Geneva Bible and the Book of Common Prayer based on Coverdale's 1539 Great

⁸ Voth, "Justice", 326.

⁹ Vox, "Diccionario", 659; Real Academia Española, "Diccionario". Trans. by author.

¹⁰ Paine, "The Learned Men", 57.

¹¹ Ibid., 70.

¹² Ibid., 57-58.

¹³ Voth, "Justice", 332.

¹⁴ Paine, "The Learned Men", 21.

¹⁵ Ibid., 67.

¹⁶ Voth, "Justice", 333-334.

Bible, along with French and Latin translations and Calvin's and Beza's commentaries. But, the difference in the choice of vocabulary is not as simple as King James' translators following the Bishops' Bible and Mary Sidney following the Geneva Bible, because even where the Geneva Bible translates *şedeq* as **righteous**, Mary chooses **just** or **justice**, which at times are only suggested by the Geneva Bible's marginal notes.

Mary's parents' families, the Sidneys and the Dudleys, were Protestant and closely allied with the court of Queen Elizabeth I until they fell out of favor because of her uncle, the Earl of Leicester. Mary married Henry Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, which gave her the leisure to write poetry and to translate several Latin and French literary works. She also had the funds and the generosity to support many poverty-stricken authors like Edmund Spenser and Abraham Fraunce, who otherwise would not have been able to dedicate themselves to literary art.

So Mary could be described as modeling *şedeq* in the senses we have cited for civic responsibility: meeting the obligations of the relationships in which she participated, exercising her wealth and influence to ensure a just community, at least in terms of authors, poets, and books, because she liberated economically oppressed poets so that they obtained their right to compose literary masterpieces. Because of her social proactivity, Mary could have no fear of translating the root sense of *şedeq* as **justice**; she did not need to evade communal responsibility through interpreting it with the purely religious sense of **righteousness**.

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