

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



**PATREON**

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

# The New English Bible Old Testament

D. F. PAYNE

---

A FULLY 'scientific' translation of the Old Testament long since passed beyond the range of scholarship of any single individual, however learned and gifted; and for this reason alone, the publication of the NEB OT is much to be welcomed, drawing as it does on the cream of British Protestant OT scholarship. The names and reputation of the OT translators are such as inspire confidence at the outset. The team could have been strengthened, of course—one or two British names of importance are missing, and a more international and inter-confessional panel might have given better balance in some respects. On paper, the team appears very strong where comparative philology and Biblical exegesis are concerned, but seems rather weaker in the realms of textual criticism and general linguistic science. Nevertheless, there is strength here, and the interdenominational nature of the venture virtually excludes sectarian bias and the like, while the character of academic scholarship itself ensures a fully honest treatment of the text. One may pardonably feel that here and there the translators have made the wrong or inferior judgment; but one can very rarely dispute their right to the view they offer us.

The first impression made on the present reviewer was the relative conservatism of the new OT translation. It appears to be rather more literal than the NT section, for instance, and is never afraid to reproduce familiar renderings where appropriate: 'God said, "Let there be light", and there was light'. Undoubtedly some readers will wish the translators had been bolder; for instance, *cherubim* is probably unintelligible to many folk, while the singular *cherub* could be positively misleading. The decision to transliterate rather than translate *Goyim* in Gen. 14: 1 and *Leummim* in Isa. 43: 4 may be correct, but looks ultra-cautious, and at least deserved annotation. At times one even feels that the translators were unsure what was meant by the text, and passed their uncertainty on to the reader! (Exod. 4: 26 offers an example: what is the statement 'Blood-bridegroom by circumcision' supposed to convey to the lay reader?)

Not infrequently, however, we find helpful paraphrase of the original. One neat rendering, retaining much of the flavour of the original, occurs in 1 Kings 18: 21, where Elijah challenges his hearers thus: 'How long will you sit on the fence?'. The same chapter offers us *scoundrels* (for *sons of Belial*) and *every mother's son* (for the less-than-euphemistic Hebrew equivalent of *every male person*); elsewhere *ships of Tarshish* become *merchantmen*. Sometimes a name is both given and interpreted; in Isa. 29: 2 we find 'I will make her my Ariel indeed, my fiery altar'. (This is reminiscent of *Peter, the Rock* in Matt. 16: 18 NEB, but will not attract the same theological objections!) An attempt to replace a Hebrew idiom by an English one is exemplified in Amos 1: 3, where the literal 'for three transgressions of Damascus, and for four' (AV) is rendered by 'for crime after crime of Damascus'. Such departure from literal meanings will no doubt be criticised by some readers, but on the whole it seems justifiable. More doubt arises when the translators, to achieve a paraphrase, have had to opt for a specific interpretation. One instance occurs as early as Gen. 1: 2: it is true that the Hebrew *ruach* can mean both *wind* and *spirit*, and it is also true that the name of God is sometimes used in the OT in an idiomatic fashion, to express a superlative; but I would personally resist strongly the interpretation (not of course a new one) which makes 'the wind/spirit of God' a mere element of primeval chaos, so to speak hostile to God. Here, therefore, I am unhappy with 'a mighty wind that swept over the surface of the waters'; but a footnote offers the traditional alternative. The NEB Genesis begins thus: 'In the beginning of creation, when God made . . . , the earth was . . .'. Here again an interpretative decision was necessary, and in this case the decision is not open to the same linguistic objections; again, a footnote proffers the alternative rendering. Whatever one's view, one cannot complain unduly when the alternatives are provided as in these two verses.

Occasionally, on the other hand, paraphrase appears to have been employed in order to gloss over some uncertainty or ambiguity. One feels a wry admiration for the rendering of Isa. 40: 6, 'All mankind is grass, they last no longer than a flower of the field'; this cleverly side-steps the issue as to what the Hebrew *chasdo* means in context (mercy? beauty? constancy?) or whether it should be emended (*glory?*). Similarly the use of the verb *disciplined* in Judges 8: 16 leaves one wondering whether the word was taken to mean *taught* (*a lesson*) or *humbled*.

Many examples could be given of the pains the translating Panel has taken to provide the fullest possible accuracy. The most up-to-date linguistic knowledge has been utilised time and time again, both in text and footnotes. At times, indeed, accuracy has been taken almost to the point of pedantry, as for instance in the list of birds in Lev. 11: 13-19: 'the griffon-vulture, the black vulture, and the bearded vulture', etc. etc. (Here the researches of Sir Godfrey Driver, the convenor of the OT Panel, and Joint Director of the whole NEB, have been fully

utilized.) Historical knowledge has also played its part. Since it is known that *Pul* and *Tiglath-pileser* were one and the same person, the incorrect *and* linking the names in 1 Chron. 5: 26 has been, very properly, replaced by *that is*. (The Hebrew will permit either rendering.) One is sorry to see, therefore, that the NEB rendering of 2 Kings 18: 9f. follows the ancient Versions (with some Hebrew MSS) in attributing the fall of Samaria to the Assyrian king Shalmaneser; here AV and RV remain superior to RSV, Jerusalem Bible, *and* NEB, for historical accuracy as well as fidelity to the standard Masoretic Hebrew text.

It must be conceded that in this last instance, the translators were probably guided more by textual than by historical considerations. But even if so, they appear to have accepted the easier reading, in defiance of a basic law of textual criticism, and without so much as a footnote. As far as the text of the OT is concerned, the translators have wisely based their rendering on the standard Hebrew text, but have made use of every important textual tradition, notably the Greek Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls (where available). As with the NT, the scholar can only choose an eclectic text, in the last resort, even though in general the Masoretic Text is clearly superior to any of its rivals. One wonders sometimes whether the Panel has been quite cautious enough in its use of the other witnesses to the text. For instance, the prayer of Solomon in 1 Kings 8: 12 begins with an extra line drawn from the Septuagint (as the Library edition acknowledges—the Standard edition is silent), despite the fact that the Septuagint *order* is here quite different, and its originality doubtful. In Isa. 53: 11, the extra word *light* is derived, again without acknowledgement in the Standard edition, from the Scrolls; here too strong reasons can be adduced for preferring the Masoretic Text. (One could make a good case for insisting that wherever the MT makes sense, its rendering should be given in a footnote at least.) Conjectural emendations are less frequent than in e.g. the RSV, but not wholly absent; it must be recognised that the occasional use of this tool is unavoidable where the OT (as opposed to the NT) is concerned.

The OT translators have continued their NT colleagues' policy of rendering words by context, making little attempt to turn the same Hebrew word by the same English one. The noun *chesed*, accordingly, appears as mutual trust, faith, loyalty, loyal friendship, kindness, love, and unchanging love (and this list is not exhaustive). Clearly such variation makes things difficult for the student who wishes to pursue word studies. Here as elsewhere, however, the Panel have shown a proper moderation, and in certain areas have shown a marked consistency in their renderings. The best example is the way Hebrew words for fools and folly have been translated throughout the Book of Proverbs.

Among the surprises sprung on us is the disappearance of the Psalm

titles, Davidic authorship and all! Of course, it is widely held that they are 'unoriginal', but they are at least very early, and it seems rather an arbitrary decision to omit them. By the same token, it strikes one as rather arbitrary to include the clearly unoriginal headings from two Septuagint MSS in the Song of Songs (these headings identify the speakers—*Bride, companions*, etc.). There is no doubt that the Panel has indulged in a freedom which not all readers would be happy to permit them in detecting late additions to the text, and in transposing verses (and occasionally sections), often without textual warrant.

Such transpositions are rare and minor in the historical books; indeed, the great majority of the rearrangements (all but about 25) are located in Job, Psalms and Isaiah. Very frequently only a line is involved, or at the most a single verse. The most ambitious rearrangements are the transference of the first six verses of Job 41 to precede chapter 40, and the rather more complex reconstruction of Zech. 3f. In both cases, there is wide though not universal agreement that some rearrangement is called for, and there is no doubt that the translators have made their decisions in the interests of intelligibility; they have not interfered with the numbering of the verses, and they have been careful to draw attention in the footnotes to all transpositions, even where only a phrase is involved. Some of the transpositions can be strongly supported—e.g. Exod. 22: 2ff (cf. RSV), Isa. 41: 6f (almost certainly to be read with 40: 19f), and Nah. 1: 2-14 (where an acrostic poem can be restored in part). Others—like Job 41: 1-6—are more controversial. Of special interest are the slight rearrangements of two of the 'Servant Songs' (note Isa. 49: 3ff and 52: 14-53: 2); here again the translators follow a long line of commentators. In general, while it is of course conceivable that displacements of the text did sometimes occur in transmission, one can only feel that accidental transpositions must have been a rarity; moreover, it must always be borne in mind that our ideas of logical progress of thought may well be different from those of the Biblical writers. However, the NEB Panel have used their freedom to transpose material with restraint, generally speaking.

One 'freedom' which is bound to attract criticism in conservative quarters is the translators' readiness to depart from renderings which link up closely with NT citations. The *virgin* (NEB *young woman*, predictably) of Isa. 7: 14 is a case in point. To be fair, one cannot condemn a translator—particularly if he is not a NT scholar—for translating the OT, as it stands, as accurately and honestly as he knows how. On the other hand, a rendering such as 'If thou hadst desired sacrifice and offering thou wouldst have given me ears to hear' (Psa. 40: 6) is only one of several ways of understanding the verse; to leave it without a footnote, and then to relegate 'in a scroll of a book it is prescribed for me' quite arbitrarily to the margin, is certainly to court criticism. In this context may be included one of the few really infelicitous turns of phrase I have so far noticed—'I will put enmity . . .

between your brood and hers' (Gen. 3: 15). Whatever the reference forward of this prediction, the word *brood* has a bad ring about it in modern English quite foreign to the Hebrew noun here used (*zera'*). Another example occurs in Psa. 45: 6: 'Your throne is like God's throne, eternal.'

The special feature of this new Version is its use of recent philological research, in which field Sir Godfrey Driver is an acknowledged master. In recent years more and more light has been thrown on the ancient Hebrew language, as other closely related languages have been studied in depth. The determination of the Panel to utilize this comparative technique to the full has resulted in an English Bible which is indeed 'New' in many places, perhaps nowhere more than in the Book of Job, which presents us with an unusual and often obscure Hebrew vocabulary. Two highly probable 'new meanings' are the *mulberry-wood* of Isa. 40: 20 and *casks of wine from Izalla* of Ezek. 27: 19. The problem in general of this field of enquiry is that it is almost impossible either to prove or to disprove the results so obtained; but an initial suspicion must always exist where the *known* meaning of a word in other parts of the OT is set aside in favour of a meaning discovered in the dictionary of another language. It is therefore startling to find in Isa. 55: 1 the same Hebrew word (*keseph*) translated first *food* (on the basis of the Akkadian language) and then *money* (its normal Hebrew sense), without any compelling reason for the former—and without any footnote. The word *berith* (covenant), is one of the commonest of OT nouns; but in Isa. 42: 6 it is suddenly translated *light* (though with a footnote). Again, the very common verb *yadha'* (know) is here and there rendered *humbled* (or synonyms), on the basis of Arabic, with no explanatory footnotes (e.g. Judges 16: 9; Isa. 53: 3). Of Sir Godfrey's own list of such 'new meanings', an examination of more than a hundred suggests that about one in two has been accepted by the Panel, and some others have penetrated to the footnotes. In the reviewer's judgment, this is too high a proportion.

One's chief criticism must, I think, be the footnotes—both as regards quality and quantity. While one must respect the unanimous (was it?) judgment of a panel of OT specialists, a Version which claims to offer scholarly accuracy should surely always indicate where any doubt does exist. But the Standard edition is distinctly short on footnotes; the Library edition is better supplied, but still falls short. To give a single example, the verb *remain* in Gen. 6: 3 is not annotated in either edition, even though it has been understood in a considerable variety of ways in recent translations and commentaries.

Nor is the content of the footnote always adequate. The RSV, though not always guiltless of lack of footnotes, does at least clearly indicate in brief compass its basis for changes. The NEB, however, overuses the abbreviation *prob. mng.* ('probable meaning'), leaving the reader to guess, all too often, whether the reason for the decision was

textual, metrical, philological, exegetical—or pure conjecture. The Standard edition makes occasional reference to the Septuagint, but to little or nothing else. The Library edition, while making much fuller reference to MSS and textual traditions other than the Masoretic, still frequently employs the vague *prob. mng.* This is especially misleading when followed by the abbreviation *Heb.*, preceding an alternative reading, since it suggests that *only* the Hebrew offers the alternative. Often enough, however, *all* texts and Versions share the *Heb.* reading. At Isa. 55: 1, for instance, the final phrase *wine and milk* is relegated to the margin, and therefore introduced by *Heb. adds*; but the latest critical edition of the Hebrew Bible offers no textual support whatever for the omission.

It does seem a pity that the Standard edition has been permitted less annotation than the Library edition. The latter, beautifully produced though it is, is bound to be used just for occasional reference, if that, by many people. One cannot after all expect the average worshipper, preacher or student to carry a three-volume Bible with him to church or classroom—to say nothing of the extra cost. It is certainly imperative that every minister should acquire the Library edition, if he is going to use the NEB OT in his preaching and teaching.

Finally, I would express the hope that very many ministers *will* do just that. No Version of the English Bible is flawless, and a reviewer is duty-bound to draw attention to such weaknesses as he observes. But it is to be hoped that the occasional questionable decision of the translators will not be seized upon and magnified out of all proportion. This is a fine and fresh translation, as accurate as modern scholarship could make it, and it will bring no disgrace upon the scholars whose careful collaboration and hard work produced it. For one reviewer at least, years of anticipation have not been disappointed.