

Letting the Hebrew Bible¹ Speak for Itself

Introduction:

On not Making NT Citation and Interpretation Retroactive.

Much has been written about the relationship between the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible in general, and about the NT's use of its scriptural sources in particular. What has often been lost in the discussion, however, is a clear recognition of the tendency for Christian communities to overwrite the Hebrew Bible with meanings and texts from the NT. Nowhere has this tendency been more obvious than in translation. This paper will seek to demonstrate this by a few selected examples, and suggest both specific solutions to the translation problems as well as general guidelines to translators in order to avoid the tendency.

In the introduction to Old Testament Quotes in the New Testament, the UBS Subcommittee on Translation strives to make a balanced statement about the relation between the Testaments in relation to the NT quotes of the OT, whether in the form of the MT or LXX or otherwise. It succeeds in all but one respect. It mentions on the one hand that that "It is not the business of the translator to 'correct' the New Testament by introducing, for example, a translation of the Hebrew Masoretic Text if the New Testament writer followed the Septuagint or some other reading." This is certainly correct. But neither should one "correct" the OT (in the case of most Bible Society publications, in the form of the text of the Hebrew Bible) with what is found as a quotation of it or an allusion to it in the NT. Perhaps this seemed too obvious to mention. Unfortunately, experience has proved otherwise.

There are various manifestations of the tendency to harmonize the Hebrew Bible with what the NT says that it says (or what the LXX says, etc.). One is verbal identity. This is overt and perhaps it is thus that it is rather rare. The most famous example is Is 7.14 (see below). More often, logical consequences of NT quotes are carried through in the corresponding passages in the Hebrew Bible. "Ye are gods" of Ps 82.6 quoted in John 10.34 with reference to humans has been used to defend that meaning in the Hebrew Bible (see below), where the context seems clearly the heavenly council. Finally, the most indirect and most likely the most common form of NT imposition on the text of the Hebrew Bible in translation is in a logical connection where no quote is involved. The "sons of God" of Gen 6.2 are often thought not to be heavenly beings because the NT asserts that angels do not marry (see below), while the context and the form both point in that direction.

¹ Hebrew Bible and OT will both be used in this paper, but not interchangeably. The OT will refer to the tradition contained in the Hebrew Bible, but will also include the textual forms of that tradition preserved in the LXX and other streams of tradition (e.g. Targum, Midrash, presumed Testimony Books, etc.). For the point of the paper, it is the Hebrew Bible which is at risk of being mistranslated, and often enough it is precisely through the NT use of one of the other forms of the tradition (usually the LXX) that this takes place. Still, it is not the presence of an alternate form of the OT itself which poses the problem of this paper (and text-critical work on the Hebrew Bible must continue to struggle with all potential text-critical issues, regardless of whether they overlap with the phenomenon described here or not), but rather that the presence in the NT of an apparent conflict with the Hebrew Bible has led Christian translators to harmonize the two at the expense of the earlier tradition. The same problem of harmonization of course exists even within the Hebrew Bible as well as within the NT, but that is perhaps more well-known and in any case is not the subject of this paper.

The irony of this situation is that while the Hebrew Bible is at the core of the traditional framework for interpretation of the NT, and thus in a sense must be allowed to "overwrite" the NT (without losing sight of the important differences in context and many times, even text, as we shall see below), the NT reinterpretation of its sacred tradition should stand on its own, as a new Midrash, while leaving the tradition to speak of and to its own time without interference.

Another way to put this would be that while the NT needs the OT at every point in order to be understood properly, the Hebrew Bible does not need the NT in the same way. The persistence of a consistent non-Christian interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Judaism up to the present time is proof enough of that. While Christians believe that this Hebrew Bible finds its completion and even its true meaning in the NT, these both go beyond the terms of the original message of that Hebrew Bible. And it is precisely that message (along with its reinterpretation in the NT) that translators of the Christian Bible are obligated to preserve faithfully .

Examples

Verbal Identity

The text of Isaiah 7.14 has been so overworked in the history of scholarship as to make it difficult to even make a start in describing the problems involved and solutions proposed. Nevertheless, the ink that has been spilt over this problem is in itself possible evidence that interpreters have been guilty of protesting too much in the defense of something which in the end is a particularly egregious example of overwriting the Hebrew Bible with the NT (here with the help of the LXX).²

Approaching the problem from translation, the problem is that if the Isaiah passage had any meaning at all in its own context, then understanding *almah* as "virgin" would result in two virgin births in the Bible, one in Isaiah, and one in the NT. While this is of course possible in theory, nothing in the Isaiah passage would lead one to believe that the woman referred there was a virgin, or even that that was the sign (as it is in the NT). In Isaiah the birth of the child Emmanuel himself is the sign that God will be with Judah and remove the immediate threat to its existence in the form of the Syro-Ephraimitic alliance (though worse is to come). Overtones of this of course are at work in the NT, and at one level may be even more important than the use of the LXX "virgin" as a prophetic proof-text, but the latter is what is foregrounded in the Synoptic passages, and that must be respected. That respect should stop at the door to the Hebrew Bible, however, and leave the Isaiah passage with its own message. Of course, the possibility exists that the Isaiah passage never meant anything in its own time, and that the text was only a prophecy of the birth of Jesus, pure and simple. But to defend this is to make hash of the Isaiah context, and translators at least should not be guilty of that.

A less famous case of making the Hebrew Bible agree with the NT (and in this case the LXX) occurs in Gen 47.31. Whereas the Hebrew says that Jacob bowed down (or worshipped) on the head of his bed (*mittah*), the LXX (and subsequently the NT at Heb 11.21) have understood this as "worshipped as he leaned on the top of his staff" (*matteh*). The NIV makes this change explicit and defends it by means of a note, while most other translations keep to the Hebrew,

² Many examples of NT reinterpretation of the OT tradition, often with the help of the LXX, could be given. Just a few in Matthew are:
 Matt 2.15 -- Hos 11.1 "Out of Egypt did I call my son"
 Matt 2.18 "Ramah..Rachel weeping"
 Matt 3.3 "a voice crying in the wilderness" -- Is 40.3 "a voice cries: in the wilderness..."
 Matt 8.17 "infirmities...diseases" -- Is 53.4 griefs...sorrows
 Matt 11.5 -Is 61.1 "meek" > "poor", "prison" > "eyes"

and explain (when they do so) that the different texts are doubtless due to the confusion of the two similar terms on the part of the LXX translator (see NJB note).

Applying the NT context for or interpretation of OT quotes to the Hebrew Bible

The first two of the following examples are not so much of the tendency being dealt with in this paper (though I do not doubt that some have tried to re-understand the OT in these terms), but examples of the absurd result of giving in to that tendency, as well as good examples of NT era exegesis of the sacred tradition.

In Luke 20.37, the text has Jesus quote Moses (from Ex 3.6) calling the Lord the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jesus is further quoted as saying that God is the God of the living and not of the dead. As a translator, one must understand this in the following way: In a language where the information might need to be made explicit, the natural way to unpack the OT quote would be to say "the God whom Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob worshipped". Jesus, however, is saying that it should be "the God whom Abraham, Isaac and Jacob worship". This is nice rhetoric, and it shuts up Jesus' opponents in the Lucan text, but no translator could defend following through on the consequences of this statement, either in Ex 3.6 or elsewhere. It simply cannot be defended as the meaning of the OT text, fine Midrash (a kind of rhetorical play on words, grammar, and meaning) as it is.

The word "seed" (*zarah* / *sperma*) has both literal (seed of a plant) and figurative (offspring, usually plural) meanings in the Bible. With regard to the figurative meaning, Paul makes the argument in Galatians 3.16, 19 that this "seed" (cf. Gen 12.7) is singular, and thus must refer to Christ. Of course in the vast majority of cases in the OT the term used in this way is a collective singular, and translators would ruin the original contexts were they to insert "descendant" where "descendants" is clearly meant just as surely as they would were they to substitute "worship" for "worshipped" in the previous example and ones like it. Paul himself uses seed with the more common (non-rhetorical) meaning later in the same chapter (v. 29), proving that his own argument earlier in the chapter is Midrash, and not to be taken as a suggestion for translators.

Several actual cases of using a NT text to "correct" the Hebrew Bible in the indirect manner described in the above paragraphs occur in the NIV. In 1 Sam 13.1, the Hebrew text seems disturbed, in that it literally would say Saul was a year old when he began to reign and he reigned for two years. Not only are the numbers impossible, but the constructions seem strained in Hebrew. The HOTTP, in an attempt to rescue the Hebrew text, has admitted that while in the first case something is plainly missing (leaving the translator with several options), in the second the writer, sympathetic to David, could be referring to the number of years Saul reigned before the anointing of David, the "true" king. It seems more likely that the latter interpretation is ingenious (and probably rabbinical), yet the handling of the text on the whole is more consistent with the data than what the NIV proposes.

In another attempt to salvage this text, the NIV has borrowed "thirty" from a few (probably late) Hebrew mss and the LXX for the first troubled number. This is not so bad, since translators would be told that whatever number was here originally, it probably indicated a full-grown man (perhaps what the LXX itself was trying to indicate). Also, the possibility always exists that the LXX has here preserved the original number, though careful counting indicates it should

be more like twenty. For the second number, NIV has gone to Acts 13.21, where the text says that Saul reigned for forty years. The NIV note at 1 Sam 13.1 admits that the NT figure is a "round" number, and adds the text's own "two" to come out with forty-two years for Saul's reign. Those who are counting these things realize that this is impossible (David would have been an old man by the time he came to power), but of course the text could have read that way.

The point is, the NIV does not admit (perhaps because it does not realize?) just how round the number in the NT is. Forty occurs in a myriad of places in the Bible, with two major distinct meanings: 1) A general time of testing or danger—almost a rite of passage (Noah, Israelites, Jesus, etc.), and 2) A formulaic way of indicating a full generation (in Judges and elsewhere). Thus apparently the NT had a tradition of Saul reigning for a generation, rather than the half-generation he most likely did rule. This doubtless was part of a symmetry having to do with the rulers of the United Kingdom (Saul, David, Solomon) each reigning a generation, since in the Hebrew Bible both David and Solomon rule for forty years.

In a similar case in Psalm 82.6, the NIV attempts to apply Jesus' hermeneutic to the OT tradition in translation. In John 10.34 Jesus uses the quote "ye are gods" from Ps 82.6 in reference to humans (probably rulers)—apparently an accepted interpretation in his day. The context of the Hebrew Bible seems to clearly indicate the heavenly council, however, and these gods were most likely the 70 god-rulers of ancient near eastern mythology appointed by El, the high god, to govern the 70 nations. These later come to be seen as guardian angels, as is evidently the case in Daniel 10.13, where the angelic being is called "the prince of Persia". The NIV chooses to favor the NT interpretation over the more plausible original context (putting "gods" in quotes, and defending the "human" interpretation in a note), perhaps because it is on Jesus' lips. Again, NT interpretation of its traditions in general should teach us to keep the contexts apart, respecting both the Midrash and the original meaning.³

In Psalm 110.1, the psalmist has Yahweh invite the king on his coronation day ("the LORD said to my lord") to sit at his right hand. This interpretation is nearly universally accepted in biblical scholarship, and is reflected in most modern translations (REB / NRSV—"my lord", and esp. GNB—"my lord the king"). Yet it is also widely recognized that by the NT era, the popular interpretation of this psalm was messianic and assumed to have been composed by David himself. This is clearly shown by Jesus' rhetorical humbling of his opponents in the Synoptics (Matt 22.44 et. al.). The NJB (in general terms) and more especially the NIV (in detail) take this messianic interpretation into their translation of the Psalm ("my Lord") and defend it in their notes. It is hard to imagine, however, that the original audience (even canonically speaking) could have been expected to derive this interpretation from the text of the psalm, and thus it is equally hard to defend it in translation.

Interpreting the OT in light of the NT

Fortunately, some of the worst cases of the tendency to interpret the OT tradition in light of the NT never get into print. Still, the fact that they come up as problems for translation teams is an indication of the tendencies outlined in this paper. In the first chapters of Genesis, the Snake (a personification of evil), appears as one of the principal characters. On more than one occasion, translators have attempted to insert "Satan" at this point, saying, "we know who it is, it is only making

³ Some would argue (unsuccessfully, I believe) on canonical grounds that the NT interpretation is the OT canonical one as well, and that the heavenly council, while perhaps in the background of the psalm, is no longer in view.

implicit information explicit." The issue is made more difficult by the fact that some languages have difficulties expressing personification, and also with expressing an individual as representing a class ("if it was one snake, then only it had to crawl on its belly, if it was all the snakes, we should say so in the translation from the beginning"). Some of these problems can be resolved (e.g. "you and your descendants"), but usually the fragile unity of the personification of evil and the etiological tale is broken. In any case, Satan as such has no place in the Hebrew Bible, other than as an accusing spirit (e.g. Job, Zecariah). To use the term as a proper name or title in the translation of the Hebrew Bible is to insert NT theology in an anachronistic way into a context which would not have understood it all.

In other cases, the tendency has been so widespread that it is difficult to find translations which have not been guilty of it at some time. The use of upper case (as in the last example as a name or title) for "spirit" in the Hebrew Bible, for example, is so widespread as to encompass virtually all Christian translations at some point in their historical development. Most biblical scholars (Christian or otherwise) have claimed for some time, however, that the theology of the OT does not contain the Holy Spirit as such at all (it is always God's life-spirit or wind or power or wisdom or creativity or charisma, etc.) , and that the NT does not make its own theology explicit, though the implication is quite strong at points (e.g. John 14). Though there has been a recognition of this by some more recent translations (cf. change in RSV to NRSV in Gen 1.2), it is still a widespread tendency in other recent modern translations (cf. NIV), and should be recognized as such.

In Gen 6.2-4 we have the well-known passage about the sons of God marrying the daughters of men. The text states that the Nephilim were their offspring, prompting many interpreters to see this as an unnatural union of heavenly and earthly beings producing giants or monsters. Others, not willing to concede that heavenly beings could procreate, have opted for the interpretation that this was the mixing of the godly line of Seth with the ungodly line of Cain. The second interpretation (cf. NIV note) is defended by many with reference to Mk12.25, where Jesus says that the angels "neither marry nor are given in marriage." Of course, close examination of this quote shows that Jesus does not say that the angels could not procreate, only that they do not (or should not?). In fact, this is what the Genesis text seems to be about: the breakdown of a barrier (in this case between the natural and the supernatural order rather than between good and evil lineages) which produces disorder in the universe.⁴

Gen 21.8ff contains the story of Hagar's (and Ishmael's) expulsion. The reason seems plain-Sarah was jealous that Ishmael would share in Isaac's inheritance (v. 10). In fact, what is worse for Isaac (and Sarah), Ishmael would have had the share of the first-born. Abraham had the option of honoring that right of inheritance or setting the (slave-)child free. Sarah demands the latter. The context for Sarah's outbreak of jealousy, what provokes her to tell Abraham to send the two away, is that she sees Ishmael "laughing" or "playing" (v. 9). This can be understood, along with the RSV, as playing or laughing with Isaac, which reminds her of the facts of the inheritance. Various Jewish traditions have taken this further (based on the ambiguity of the term laugh/play in Hebrew) to assert that Ishmael was indulging in immoral fertility cult rites (cf. Ex 32.6 and the use of the term there), or even that he was shooting arrows at Isaac as if in play.

⁴ Paul's statement that women should wear veils "on account of the angels" (1 Cor 11.10) has been used by some to defend the "heavenly beings" position, but the passage is too fraught with interpretational difficulties and possibilities of its own to take a firm stand on it.

Paul may be aware of these traditions when he claims (Ga 4.29) that "...he who was born according to the flesh persecuted he who was born according to the Spirit..." or he may be thinking of the descendants of the primary individuals and the conflicts between them. Most translations with notes, in any case, admit to the possible ambiguity but keep to the less interpretive "laughing/playing with Isaac" (cf. the change in NEB and REB in this regard). NIV, however, translates "mocking," and though the Genesis note has the other alternative, the Galatians note indirectly defends the translation by stating that Paul's comments are "suggested by Ge 2.9." Though the distinct possibility exists here that the meaning "mock" was intended originally, it still seems the better practice to try to ignore NT-era exegesis as much as possible in translating the Hebrew Bible, unless we can corroborate the interpretation with texts much closer to and contexts much less actively reinterpreted of the original text than the NT or its immediate Jewish precursors were.

There are cases where the NT interpretation may be as close as it can get to the original reading, and still cause difficulties in later translations. In Psalm 8.5 (6), man is described as "a little lower than (the) *Elohim*." This could be God himself (RSV/NRSV/GNB), but may well refer to the heavenly council in general (cf. "a god" in REB and NJB). In the NT, of course, the heavenly council has been demoted to a court of angels. Thus Heb 2.7 speaks of "angels" in its quote of Psalm 8, and the NIV has translated "heavenly beings" in Psalm 8. Since there are no other heavenly beings for modern readers of the Bible other than God and the angels, the plural here puts the NIV squarely on the NT side of the contrast, making humans a little lower than they were originally intended to be.⁵

In the first chapters of Genesis the text speaks of the creation of "man(kind)," (*adam*) and yet as the narrative unfolds, this "man" more and more becomes an actor in the story, a specific person with wife and children, etc. Just where to make the transition between generic and specific and on what grounds has been a matter of concern for translators. In general it has been agreed that when the term occurs without the definite article, it is the proper name of the character in the story, while when it has the definite article it is "the man." It has been difficult for translations to be consistent, however, as a comparison of the major modern English translations testifies.

On the one hand, the NRSV, the NEB/REB, and the JB/NJB do not use "Adam" until 4.25. RSV uses it at 4.1, GNB at 4.1 and 3.20-21, and NIV at all of the above as well as at 3.17 and 2.20. One of the problems is that at 2.20, 3.17, and 3.21 there is a preposition without a definite article affixed to the term, leaving some ambiguity as to how to interpret the meaning. NRSV footnotes the alternative in all three cases, while on the other side NIV only footnotes 2.20 in this way, but does footnote 3.20 and 4.1, where it goes against the general rule entirely. GNB, for its part, seemingly picks a logical point in the story to start with names ("Adam" names his wife Eve) in 3.20 and leaves it at that.

Interestingly, in 1 Cor 15.45 Paul speaks of "the first man, Adam" with reference back to Gen 2.7, when God breathes the breath of life into humankind (or Adam, to quote Paul). The NIV may not be consciously following Pauline thinking in this regard (it does not start translating the term "Adam" in 2.7, after all), but the tendency to read "Adam" back into

⁵ Unfortunately, the NIV continues this tendency even when (correctly!) correcting the MT according to the ancient texts and versions. In Deut 32.43 the NIV lists together the LXX's "angels" (standard LXX translation of Hebrew "sons of God") and a Qumran reading ("sons of God") as evidence for understanding "angels" here (in accord with Heb 1.6). But of course the Qumran material is in Hebrew, where "sons of God" refers to the heavenly council, and not to angels (*malakim*). The HOTTIP, on the other hand, also accepts the Qumran reading, but as meaning "gods."

earlier phases of the story seems clear enough. It would be better to err on the side of the majority of modern translations cited above, or at least pick a logical point in the story with the GNB, than to follow the inconsistent and possibly tendentious example of the NIV.

Conclusion

The general terms of this paper--that the Hebrew Bible should be allowed to speak for itself, have its own voice, make some kind of sense to an original audience of its own, should not be a controversial one for translators. The specific examples, on the other hand, may well be debatable. It is precisely because of the way the NT used its sources that the situation gets so muddled at the micro level. Still, an unmistakable pattern is discernible, even if an example or two is rejected here or there. If Christians expect Jews to be tolerant of the way the NT reinterprets the Jewish tradition of its time, Christians must also respect the Jewish readings of the Hebrew Bible. These readings too often have been characterized as a stubborn attempts to ignore what to Christians is the obvious reality of Jesus as Messiah. In reality, they were the only readings that existed prior to the NT reinterpretation of the tradition in light of its own understanding of who Jesus was.

Only if we translate the Hebrew Bible faithfully in its original context--to the best of our ability to discern it--can we really honor what the NT does in reactualizing its scriptural traditions in terms of its understanding of the meaning of Jesus' life and death. To impose the NT quote or interpretation on the Hebrew Bible, even when it can be found in another OT textual tradition, simply is dishonest historically and does not do justice to any of the texts involved. Translators may not always understand why we need to preserve differences where "obviously" the NT is merely explaining the true meaning of the OT, but it is the job of the exegete to explain why each text must be allowed to speak for itself. Anything less is the application of a "flatlander hermeneutic,"⁶ in which OT says nothing different from NT, and NT says nothing different than our particular church tradition. One of the reasons the Bible continues to serve all the churches (and the Hebrew Bible continues to serve Jews and Christians alike) is that tendencies such as those outlined in this paper have been resisted on the whole. Where they remain, they should be rooted out and rejected anew, before the sleep of generations makes even their finding a matter which only scholars debate.

⁶ This term was coined, as far as I know, by David Hubbard at Fuller Seminary in his scripture classes.