

Appendix II: Concerning Translation

Modern Hebrew is written from right to left (the opposite of most European languages). In very early times, Hebrew might be written in either direction, with the letters turned around accordingly.¹ From left to right is better for the right-handed writer using pen and ink, as his hand is less likely to smudge the ink. From right to left is better for inscribing in stone, as it is easier for the left hand holding the stylus to space the letters correctly. Thus, it seems likely the Ten Commandments, inscribed on tablets, influenced the standardization of writing Hebrew from right to left.

Difficulties of Translation

There are fewer than 10,000 Hebrew words used in the Bible. The English language has more than 500,000 words (the most of any language in the world). Thus a single Hebrew word may correspond to any of several English words of various nuances. Moreover, Hebrew tends to distinguish nuances with different nouns, while English more often distinguishes by adding adjectives to a single noun. And both languages have words spelled the same but with different meanings. Thus, a goal of good English translation, that of uniquely preserving each Hebrew word with a unique English synonym, can only be approached in understandable English. To preserve broad meanings or ambiguities in the Hebrew wording, or to preserve meanings more specific than can be expressed in simple English, notes are added in RVIC²⁰⁰⁰.

Word separation: In earliest Hebrew, as in earliest Greek and other languages, no spaces were inserted between words. The Qumran Biblical scrolls (and Hezekiah's Siloam inscription) exhibit spacing between words many centuries before Greek manuscripts do. In only a few scriptures is there an apparent ambiguity as to where the words should be separated. One example may be seen in Hosea 6:5, where the standard Massoretic text, מופשכית אצי רוא, means "and thy judgments *are as light that goeth forth.*" But if the letter kaph, כ, is instead associated with the second word (to the left), it becomes a preposition (and converts the preceding ך from a plural marker to the first person singular pronoun); so מופשית אצי רואכ means, "and my judgment *is as light that goeth forth.*" The Septuagint and Aramaic translators read it the latter way, as did a Jewish Targum.

Vowels: The original Hebrew manuscripts and tablets used only consonants, with no vowels. Though this practice may seem difficult to the English reader, one could nevertheless become accustomed to it. For example, consider Ge 1:1,

Ge 1:1 without vowels
N th bgnnng Gd crtd th hvns nd th rth.

Ge 1:1 with vowels
In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

While the reader will find the reading on the right much easier to understand, he can nevertheless become accustomed to reading the same words on the left. There could be an ambiguity as to whether God created, or God carted, the heavens and the earth. But the ambiguity is to be resolved by ruling out absurd meanings, as is the rule in Hebrew.

Occasionally a different choice of vowel points can significantly affect the meaning of a scripture. A prime example is found in Psalm 22:16, where M. Abegg reports 5/6HevPs, Septuagint (also Aramaic and Latin Vulgate), and a few Massoretic manuscripts read,

¹ If ancient practices of writing either direction seem strange to English readers, 20th- century Japanese may be written in either direction, or from top to bottom. Some paleo-European languages were even written in a spiral.

“They pierced my hands and my feet.” Most Massoretic manuscripts point it differently, so as to read, “Like a lion *are* my hands and my feet.” [Whereas Jewish theologians prefer to avoid the former, the Companion Bible translates the latter as, “Like a lion *they break up* my hands and my feet” and then compares it with John 19:37. Tregelles’ Gesenius (p. 388) discusses both ways of translation.]

The Value of Punctuation

Punctuation: Hebrew manuscripts and printed texts show no punctuation marks, except for a colon (:) at the end of each verse. It is desirable in English to add punctuation, as may be demonstrated by the following extreme example:

Without punctuation	With punctuation
John where Bill had the teacher’s approval.	John, where Bill had had “had had,” had had “had;” “had had” had had the teacher’s approval.

Punctuation thus makes the incomprehensible relatively easy to understand.

Some Peculiarities of Hebrew vs. English

Users of Hebrew-English diaglots may note some significant differences between Hebrew and its English translations.

Sentences in Biblical Hebrew commonly begin with the verb, whether VOS (verb-object-subject) or VSO word order. While this word order may seem strange to the reader of English, VOS word order does occur in English, albeit infrequently, as may be seen in the last sentence of the following example:

SVO & SVO

Jacob went to bless Pharaoh.
And he did bless Pharaoh.

SVO & VOS

Jacob went to bless Pharaoh.
And bless Pharaoh he did.

The root of almost all Hebrew verbs is exactly three letters (consonants) long. The verb root is active (“Kal,” meaning All) and in the past tense. To change the tense or specie of the verb, one or two letters may be prefixed.

To change to the future tense, the letter yod (י) or tav (ת, with the dot inside the letter), or in the first person (singular or plural) aleph(א) or nun (נ), is usually prefixed.

To change to the passive (“niphil”), the letter nun (נ) is prefixed.

To change to intensive (“Piel;” “Pual” for passive), a dot (“;” Dagesh) is inserted in the middle letter.

To change to causative (“Hiphil;” “Hophel” for passive), the letter he (ה) is prefixed. [For “Hiphil,” ׀ is also inserted before the last letter.]

To change to reflexive (“Hithpael”), the letters tav and he (תה) are prefixed.

(There are five to ten other species of the verb, but they are used too infrequently to be mentioned here. See Hebrew Students Manual, New Wilson’s Old Testament Word Studies, or other Hebrew grammar book.) For examples of usage:

Verb Specie	Past	Future
Kal (active)	he blessed	he will bless
Niphil (passive)	he was blessed	he will be blessed
Piel (intensive, active)	he diligently blessed	he will diligently bless
Pual (intensive, passive)	he was diligently blessed	he will be diligently blessed
Hiphil (causative, active)	he caused to bless	he will cause to bless
Hophal (causative, passive)	he was caused to bless	he will be caused to bless
Hithpael (reflexive)	he blessed himself	he will bless himself

In addition to past and future, infinitive (to bless), imperative (bless thou), and participle (blessing) forms are also used.

Tenses: Hebrew has only past and future tenses; it has no present tense. However, Hebrew uses these tenses significantly differently from English and other European languages. The “past” tense is the more common tense, but it is used to express action which may be past, present, or future in relation to the time at which it is spoken or written. The “future” tense implies action which sequentially follows a “past” tense, even if both actions are in the distant past, or both are in the far future, or the first (“past”) is present and ongoing and the second (“future”) is to follow afterwards. [They are really “anytime” and “subsequent” tenses.]

Almost all verbs in Hebrew consist of exactly three consonants (although prefixes and suffixes may be added to indicate particular tenses and moods). Thus, changing of a single letter by a copyist could substantially alter the meaning. [In principle the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet allow for over 10,000 verbs, but some combinations are not used. There is a total of nearly 8,700 Hebrew words and names used in the Old Testament.]

Moods: Hebrew employs only one mood, which includes both the indicative and subjunctive. Occasionally it may be uncertain which is intended, as in Job 14:15, 22:23, or Ps 139:19. Sometimes it may be unclear whether direct speech or a question is intended, as in Job 19:5, 21:17-18, Ps 22:1, 68:13, or Pr 25:8. And again it may be unclear whether an imperative is intended, as in Job 22:23, Ps 5:11, 72:2-14 (intermittently), or Pr 23:2.

Verbless: Hebrew, unlike English, may omit the verb to be in order to show an identity, or equality, or very close relationship. Insertion of the verb to be may convey the same meaning as in English or may imply metaphor; but it commonly implies a change of condition, before or after. (See Preface for examples.)

Nouns: In Hebrew, the gender of nouns is either masculine or feminine. The noun may be either singular, dual, or plural. The masculine plural is formed by suffixing –im, ים– (or sometimes just –i), as hand and hands: yad יד and yadim ידי. The feminine plural suffixes –oth, תו–, as river and rivers: nahar נהר and naharoth תורנה. The dual is primarily used for objects that frequently are in pairs, and it suffixes –ayim (or, –aim), ים–: two hands, yadayim; two rivers, naharayim [e.g., in Ge 24:10, Aram-naharaim: Syria *between the two rivers* (i.e., between Euphrates and Tigris)].

Articles: The definite article, the, is formed by prefixing he- (ה־ with a dot inside the next letter, or ה־). The Hebrew word את, eth, indicates action on an object and is commonly untranslated in other versions. It has sufficient force to translate it as a definite article whenever the definite article is otherwise absent, and it is so translated here.

Italics: *Italic type* signifies words, or part of a word, that are not in the Hebrew original, but seem implied or are required for good English. Earlier RV's retreated significantly from the AV italicizing, but R²⁰⁰⁰ has restored and enhanced it. The English language uses the definite article, the, more than does Hebrew. Where Hebrew lacks the definite article, but it has been translated into English with the definite article, the article is italicized: *the*. Occasionally the English will show the indefinite article italicized, *a*, when the Hebrew itself has the definite article. The Hebrew word, eth, is treated here as a definite article. Italicization is complete as of Summer 2004, including the Aramaic sections of Ezra and Daniel. However, following a preposition, the Hebrew indicates the definite article only by choice of vowel sound, which choice is not seen in manuscripts as early as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

For most oral reading, all italics can simply be read as though not italicized. Alternatively, they may be read softly.

Prepositions: Hebrew prepositions are commonly abbreviated to a single letter and prefixed to the next word. Each preposition has a primary meaning but is also used even more broadly than in English. כּ, in; at, on, with, by (no motion is implied). לְ, towards; to, for. כּ, as; like, according to. מִ, from; out of. Use of different pointings (different from, or points) may imply a definite article. Further, see the *Hebrew Students Manual*, p. 90.

Idiom: As in every other language, some Hebrew words take on additional meanings, which other languages may not assign to them. As a significant example, the word sheba (seven) is pronounced “sheva” (from this root, stem the German word sieben, and the English seven). But shāba (to swear) is spelled with the same three consonants and is evidently derived from it.² Seven ewe lambs accompanied Abraham’s oath to Abimelech (Ge 21:23-31). So there is an ambiguity translating Beersheba into English, whether it is Well of an Oath, or Seven Wells. The association of seven with the oath-bound covenant is evident in the seven days’ consecration of the priesthood (Lv 8:33-35), the seven days’ feast of unleavened bread (or, feast of passover, Ex 12:15), seven lamps in the tabernacle (Ex 25:37), sprinkling the blood in the Most Holy seven times on the Day of Atonement (Lv 16:14, 19), etc. But there is unfortunately no way to preserve this pithy ambiguity in English translation.

Alphabetic numerics: In most ancient alphabets, each successive letter was used to represent a successively larger number, from 1 to 10, then by 10’s to 100, then by 100’s to the end of the alphabet. (See Appendix 1.)

Transliteration: Some pairs of letters are difficult to distinguish in transliterating into English. Although most names are retained here from the American Revised Version, 1901, a few are adjusted. Teth (ט) and Tav (ת) are transliterated t and th (like a Greek θ) respectively. Samech (ס) and Shin (ש) may originally have signified s and sh respectively (e.g., Jg 12:6), but the latter now comes in two forms, שׁ and שׂ, which in turn are here transliterated s and sh. Thus, this edition does not distinguish ס from שׁ. Kaph (כ) and Qoph (ק) are transliterated k and q respectively. (ARV usually transliterates both by k.) Both are sounded by the back of the tongue touching the palate, but with qoph touching farther towards the throat. (Sephardic pronunciation distinguishes the two; Ashkenazic seldom does.) Further, see Appendix 1.

Peculiarities in the English

The eighteenth-century English of the revised versions (RV’s) preserves a very little of the verb conjugations of most other languages. Similarities may be seen in the table below.

West Indo - European		East Indo - European	Semito – Hamitic
Germanic languages			Semitic
RV English	recent German	Greek	Hebrew endings
I come	ich komme	erchomai	-thi
thou comest	du kommst	erchosai	-th(ā)
he cometh	er kommt	erchotai	-(āh)
we come	wir kommen	erchometha	-nu
you come	ihr kommt	erchosthe	-them (-then)
they come	sie kommen	erchontai	-u

² The word sabbath (rest) is similarly related to it.

Indo-European languages have only remotely preserved the Semitic terminations.

Nouns are no longer declined in English.

Possessive pronouns retain limited declination in eighteenth-century English.

before a consonant	before a vowel	non-modifying
my kingdom is...	mine eyes have seen...	mine is the kingdom
thy kingdom is...	thine eyes have seen...	thine is the kingdom
his kingdom is...	his eyes have seen...	his is the kingdom
our kingdom is...	our eyes have seen...	ours is the kingdom
your kingdom is...	your eyes have seen...	yours is the kingdom
their kingdom is...	their eyes have seen...	theirs is the kingdom

Improvements in this edition: The Hebrew *sukkah* (pl. *sukkoth*) is almost uniformly translated booth, which distinguishes it from *mishkan*, which is translated tabernacle. Thus the feast of Sukkoth, which some translate “feast of tabernacles,” is here translated “feast of booths.”

The expression, “between the two evenings” is everywhere incorporated into the text, in distinction to “at even.” Compare Ex 16:12-13.

The English word “oracle” (AV-ARV 1Ki 6:5-8:8, etc.) has now come to be associated more with inquiry of ancient Greek gods than with the Bible and its Temple. The concept of the Hebrew word “*d’biyr*” seems to be a place from which the authoritative word is spoken, as a (judicial) Bench, Chair of authority, seat of justice (mercy seat or judgment seat). [The root word, *dābār*, primarily meaning a setting in order, whence the concept of a judiciously-worded pronouncement, is commonly translated: word, thing, manner, matter.] The word “oracle” has been replaced here by the word “Word.” (“Burden” has replaced “oracle” in Pr 30:1 and 31:1, because it is from an unrelated Hebrew word.)

“*Nephesh*,” the Hebrew word translated “soul,” is evidently used more broadly than any single English word: it is used of breathing beings in general, of both humans and animals, and even fish (Ge 1:20-2:7), and of both living beings and dead bodies (Ge 2:7, Nu 9:6-9). In the few places where “*nephesh*” is translated other than “soul,” that is called to attention in the footnotes.

Limitations of this edition: Not all words have been uniformly and precisely translated.

The Hebrew word “*ruach*” (and the corresponding “*pneuma*” in Greek) is used of the invisible forces of “wind,” “breath,” and “spirit.” Without an English word of similarly broad meaning, “*ruach*” has been inconsistently translated, albeit according to the best estimate of its context. But let the reader know that any of the three meanings is allowable. [This difficulty is experienced also in English. For example, the word “fast:” A speedy horse is fast, but if it is tied up it is also fast; a person may eat fast, but if he does not eat it is a fast. Hence, difficulty may arise in uniformly translating a word into other languages.]

Tabernacle: The Authorized Version (AV, KJV) has fairly consistently translated several words pertaining to the tabernacle: *mishkan* – tabernacle; *petach* – door; *paroketh* – veil; *qodesh haqadashim* – most holy (lit. holy of holies); *miqdash* –sanctuary; but not *ohel* – tent or tabernacle; *qodesh* – holy, holy *place*, holiness, or sanctuary; *masak* – hanging or covering. The Revised Versions (1885, 1901 and RVIC²⁰⁰⁰) have endeavored to retain or improve the consistency in the first five words, while making also the latter three more concordant: *ohel* – tent; *qodesh* – Holy; *masak* – screen (door between Holy and court). RVIC²⁰⁰⁰ has additionally corrected candlestick to lampstand. Regrettably, RVIC²⁰⁰⁰ has not found for *miqdash* (sanctuary) a word cognate to Holy, to express the close connection to *qodesh*.

The expression, “children of Israel” (and sometimes of other nations) is retained from the AV and earlier RV’s (Revised Versions), though literally it is “bnai Yisroel,” or “sons of Israel” in each case.

How Accurate are our English Bible Translations?

Which English Bible translation is best for the sincere person? How faithful is it to the original Hebrew/Aramaic (or Greek)? And how much should he entrust himself to that translation?

[Tabulation below represents accuracy in 68 representative Old Testament texts]

Old-Testament English Translation	Accuracy
American Standard Version (ASV, or ARV, 1901)	84
New American Standard Bible (NASB, 1963) [NAS95 = 77]	82
(British) Revised Version (RV, 1881-1885)	77
English Standard Version (ESV, 2001)	83
Revised Standard Version (RSV, 1952)	82
New Revised Standard Version (NRSV, 1989)	76
Rotherham, The Emphasized Bible (Rhm, 1902)	82
Sacred Name restoration Bible (Traina, modified Rhm, 1963)	82-
Stern, Complete Jewish Bible (CJB, 1998)	81
Amplified (1965)	79
Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB, 1999)	79-
New World (NWT, J.W.; 1960)	78-
NET Bible (http://www.bible.org/netbible/)	76 ⁺
Jewish Publication Society (Margolis; JPS, 1917)	76
Jewish Publication Society - Revised (JPS2, 1985)	64
Berkeley (Verkuyl, 1959)	76
Darby (Plymouth Brethren)	75
New International Version (NIV, 1973)	73
New King James Version (NKJV, 1979)	73
Revised English Bible (REB, 1989)	71
New English Bible (NEB, 1970)	69
God's Word (Lutheran; 1995)	71-
Anchor Bible (1964-)	est. 70
New Century Version (NCV, 1987)	69
New Living Translation (NLT, 1996, 2004)	68 ⁺
Smith-Goodspeed (1927)	68
Jay Green diaglott (1979)	67
Byington (1972)	67-
New American Bible (NAB, RCC; 1970)	67-
Jerusalem (RCC; 1966)	66
Leeser (Jewish; 1854)	61
Moffatt (1924)	60-
Basic English (Hooke, 1949)	58 ⁺
Today's English Version (TEV, = GNB, 1976)	57
Young's Literal (1863)	54
Contemporary English Version (CEV, 1995)	52
Living Bible (K. Taylor, 1971)	51 ⁺
Ferrar Fenton (1903)	48
2001 – An American English Bible (http://www.2001translation.com/)	45
Knox (RCC; 1950)	40 ⁺
Douay-Rheims/Confraternity (Latin Vulgate, RCC; 1609/1950)	40
Brenton (Greek Septuagint, 1851)	40
Thomson (Greek Septuagint, 1808)	39
Companion Bible (annotated AV)	35
Lamsa (Aramaic = Syriac, 1957)	35-
Harkavy (Jewish; 1916)	32
Authorized Version (AV = KJV, 1611, 1614, 1762, 1769)	14

Relative Accuracy of English-Language Bible Translations

Based on 209 selected texts

Complete-Bible English Translation	Accuracy
Rotherham, The Emphasized Bible (Rhm, 1902)	83½
Sacred Name restoration Bible (Traina, modified Rhm, 1963)	81
New World (NWT, J.W.; 1960)	76 ⁺
Stern, Complete Jewish Bible (CJB, 1998)	75
New American Standard Bible (NASB, 1963) [NAS95 = 70]	75½
American Standard Version (ASV, or ARV 1901)	74½
(British) Revised Version (RV, 1881-1885)	70½
English Standard Version (ESV, 2001)	75
Revised Standard Version (RSV, 1952)	72
New Revised Standard Version (NRSV, 1989)	69
Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB, 1999)	72
Amplified (1965)	68
New International Version (NIV, 1973)	67½
Anchor Bible (1964–)	est. 67
Berkeley (Verkuyl, 1959)	66
Darby (Plymouth Brethren)	65 ⁺
Smith-Goodspeed (1923, 1927)	65
Revised English Bible (REB, 1989)	64½
New English Bible (NEB, 1970)	62½
Byington (1972)	64 ⁺
New American Bible (NAB, RCC; 1970)	63½
God's Word (Lutheran; 1995)	63
New Century Version (NCV, 1987)	61½
Moffatt (1924)	61 ⁺
New Living Translation (NLT, 1996, 2004)	61
Today's English Version (TEV, = GNB, 1976)	60½
Jerusalem (RCC; 1966)	59 ⁺
2001 – An American English Bible (http://www.2001translation.com/)	55 ⁺
Basic English (Hooke, 1949)	54½
Ferrar Fenton (1903)	54
Jay Green diaglott (1979)	53
New King James Version (NKJV, 1979)	52½
Contemporary English Version (CEV, 1995)	51
Young's Literal (1863)	49½
Living Bible (K. Taylor, 1971)	45
Douay-Rheims/Confraternity (Latin Vulgate, RCC; 1609/1950)	44½
Knox (RCC; 1950)	40 ⁺
Companion Bible (annotated AV)	36
Lamsa (Aramaic = Syriac, 1957)	32 ⁺
Authorized Version (AV = KJV, 1611, 1614, 1762, 1769)	9
Old Testament only	
Jewish Publication Society (Margolis; JPS, 1917)	76
Jewish Publication Society - Revised (JPS2, 1985)	64
Leeser (Jewish; 1854)	61
Brenton (Greek Septuagint, 1851)	40
Thomson (Greek Septuagint, 1808)	39
Harkavy (Jewish; 1916)	32

Differences of $\pm 5\%$ should be considered insignificant, but above $\pm 10-15\%$ should be quite significant.

The comparative accuracies of English language Old Testaments is compiled from a list of sixty-eight representative test passages for translation, which are in the texts below:

Ge 1:20	Dt 7:12	Ps 4:2	Is 30:1
1:28	13:13	22:17	30:7
4:23	27:16	144:7	41:7
25:8	Josh 8:35	Pr 8:22	53:8
Ex 3:22	Jg 16:11	20:30	54:6
7:15	2Sa 3:33	24:11	Jr 8:8
12:6	6:19	27:16	9:7
12:26	22:6	29:24	Da 12:11
26:9	2Ki 25:27	Is 1:25	Hos 4:18
27:21	Job 3:8	7:14	6:9
28:8	6:10	9:1	10:10
28:11	11:20	9:5	14:2
29:41	17:6	10:23	Am 3:12
39:32	19:26	11:1	5:9
Nu 6:7	22:25	16:3	5:26
24:14	37:11	25:5	Nah 2:7
31:28	39:13	28:25	Zc 12:10