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Translating Common Words

Once, thirty years ago, when I was first writing a commentary, my teenage son saw me working with a stack of existent commentaries and remarked, “So, you read all those commentaries and you make a precis of them and then you publish that as your commentary?” I hope it wasn’t so, but there is a danger of working that way. Nowadays when I write I have on my desk simply a copy of the JPSV 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 them at a subsequent stage of 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.

The *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* has been described as more like a concordance than a dictionary, and in seeking to discover what lies in a text, I especially value that aspect of the dictionary. It helps me see how words are used and thus what they mean in contexts. When I heard David Clines introduce the dictionary project, I also recall him telling us that the dictionary would focus more on common words than uncommon and difficult ones. 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 dictionary’s entries for many of the words in those chapters and discovering distinctive aspects of the words’ usage. I remember emailing David after the first two or three volumes had come out to say so – which I suspect is why I was asked to give this paper a decade or so later.

I found the listing of ‘synonyms’ and ‘antonyms’ useful in connection with identifying distinctive aspects of the usage of different common words and words about whose general meaning there is little real doubt or difficulty or controversy. For instance, the list of synonyms for *bahar* (three words for desire and one for ask) clarified that when Yahweh describes Jacob as the one he chose[[1]](#footnote-1) 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 *gallim* 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 *gallim* of the sea.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The dictionary also helped me make up my mind about interpretive possibilities. For instance, its list of passages where *dibber* introduces direct speech confirmed a conviction of mine about Isaiah 52:6, that it 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 *ken,* andspecifically its detailed account of the use 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*, *’aheb*, *sane’, yare’, darash, biqqesh, ‘ebed, nasa’, yeshu‘ah*,  *mishpat*, and *tsedaqah*.

Consideration of the way such words are translated raised at least two questions. One difficulty about some of them is that they have a spread of meanings in Hebrew that requires us to give them different translations in different contexts in English. 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*, *oiketes*, and *therapon*. 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* both to describe Israel as Yahweh’s *‘ebed* and to render other occurrences of *‘ebed*. In turn, *pais* naturally also renders *na‘ar*, the Hebrew word for a servant boy.The Greek words *doulos* and *pais* may have different connotations,[[3]](#footnote-3) 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,” the King James Version never renders *‘ebed* as “slave”; neither do the nineteenth-century revisions of the King James Version. The translation of ‘*ebed* as slave became common in translations from the NRSV onwards. I do not why this change happened. I am sure 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 on the basis of serving a master here for a set number of years. The Hebrew Bible does not describe the legal position or the experience of an *‘ebed* as generally very like that of a slave, not least 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 *yare’*.Whereas modern translations misleadingly treat *‘ebed* as a word with two English equivalents, translations commonly treat *yare’* as a word with one English equivalent and are then misleading. For *yare’*, too,a translation tradition developed. in which the word *yir’ah* commonly becomes *phobos* in the Septuagint, *timor* in the Vulgate, and “fear” in English. Every first-year-Hebrew student knows that *yare’* means “fear.” Except that it doesn’t. It 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 ’elohim* as “the fear of God” gives a misleading impression. The semantic range of *yare’* and words of similar meaning is equivalent to that of at least two English words. Something similar is true of *yada‘*. Here the default translation is “know,” but the word’s implication is more like “acknowledge” or “recognize” and thus “heed.” The declaration about Cyrus in was not that he did not know Yahweh but that he did not acknowledge Yahweh.[[4]](#footnote-4) The nations’ destiny in was not to “know that I am Yahweh” but “to acknowledge that I am Yahweh.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

For *yir’ah*,modern translations sometimes do use a word such as worship, which solves one problem but creates another. In general, modern translations have moved away from having a default rendering for each Hebrew word. It is an aspect of a move away from word-for-word translation towards dynamic equivalence. But when we use different English translations for the same word in Hebrew, as we sometimes must, we can obscure significant links between passages that use the same Hebrew word. In Jonah chapter 1 there is a sixfold recurrence of the verb *yare’*, the adjective *yare’*,and the noun *yir’ah*. One English version translates the root in four different ways,[[6]](#footnote-6) which is in part understandable in the context, yet 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. *Hesed* and *tsedaqah* 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 *tsedaqah* became *dikaiosune*, and in the Vulgate became *iustitia*, and in the King James Bible became “righteousness.” Another version of a kind of tradition of translation thus develops, in which *dikaiosune* and *iustitia* and “righteousness,” for instance, become “signs” for *tsedaqah*, something like code expressions. Implicitly, when you see *dikaiosune* or *iustitia* or “righteousness,” you need to think “Ah, this means *tsedaqah*, and I know what *tsedaqah* means.”

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

Similarly, *yeshu‘ah* became *soteria* and then *salus* and then “salvation.” So every first-year Hebrew student knows that *yeshu‘ah* means “salvation.” Except that it doesn’t. 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.

*Mishpat* is a particularly complex example. The *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* gives *mishpat* the basic meaning “judgment” and gives seven columns to that meaning, then gives three columns to the meaning “justice,” four columns to the meaning “ordinance,” and three columns to some other meanings. In the Septuagint *mishpat* is commonly rendered by *krisis*, in the Vulgate by *iudicium*, and in the King James Bible by “judgment.” But after the Second World War “justice” came close to being the default translation of *mishpat*. Now I have the impression that both *mishpat* and the verb *shaphat* essentially denote concrete actions. “Judge” and “judgment” 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 ones, but it is entirely possible to *shapat* or to exercise *mishpat* in an unjust way.

So why has *mishpat* come to mean “justice”? My hermeneutic of suspicion says that it’s because Christian readers like to feel enthusiastic about justice, so they like seeing the word “justice” in the Bible. And of course the Bible is concerned about justice. But one needs then to note a further difficulty. Moshe Weinfeld has commented that the expression *mishpat utsedaqah* is the Hebrew equivalent to social justice,[[7]](#footnote-7) but the implication is not that *mishpat utsedaqah* means what we mean by social justice. *Tsedaqah* means something like doing the right thing by people to whom you have obligations—it is close to faithfulness. *Mishpat* denotes the exercise of authority or government. So *mishpat utsedaqah* suggest the exercise of authority in a way that does right to people to whom we have obligations*[[8]](#footnote-8)* 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. He notes that translating Homer’s word *dike* by justice obscures the fact. So does the translation of *mishpat* by “justice.”

A recurrent issue in Christian translation of the Hebrew Bible appears here. The Hebrew Bible often refers to the same realities or concepts as the New Testament and/or as Christian faith, but it doesn’t use the same words for them. The Hebrew Bible talks about justice and righteousness and salvation and the Messiah, but *mishpat* and *tsedaqah* and *yeshu‘ah* and *mashiah* are not their words for these ideas. Conversely, when the Hebrew Bible uses the words *mishpat* or *tsedaqah* or *yeshu‘ah* or *mashiah*, it is not referring to justice, righteousness, salvation, or the Messiah.

I close with my favorite illustration of a number of these issues, Isaiah 56:1.

שִׁמְרוּ מִשְׁפָּט

וַעֲשׂוּ צְדָקָה

כִּי קְרוֹבָה יְשׁוּעָתִי לָבוֹא

וְצִדְקָתִי לְהִגָּלוֹת

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 *tsedaqah* and the link with *yeshu‘ah*. You do the right thing by one another, says Yahweh, because I am doing the right thing by you. In contrast, here are some standard translations:

The Common English Bible:

Act justly and do what is righteous,

because my salvation is coming soon, and my righteousness will be revealed

The NIV:

Maintain justice and do what is right,

for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed

The NRSV:

Maintain justice, and do what is right,

for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed

The JPSV:

Observe what is right and do what is just;

For soon My salvation shall come and My deliverance be revealed.

The line’s significance depends on the double usage of *tsedaqah* 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.

My conclusion about the translation of common words is that there are some translations to avoid: “salvation” for *yeshu‘ah*, “justice” for *mishpat*, “righteousness” for *tsedaqah*, and “slave” for *‘ebed*. Something like “doing what’s right” may be as near as we can get to a default rendering for *tsedaqah*. Something like decision-making or the exercise of authority or government seems as near as we can get to a default understanding or *mishpat*. Deliverance is quite a satisfactory rendering of *yeshu‘ah*. “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*. On the other hand, where it’s possible to keep the same translation for a word, that routine helps to preserve links within passages, and to this end we need a step back from recent practice associated with dynamic equivalence and the awareness that meaning lies in contexts and sentences, not just in individual words. More generally, there is something to be said for a return to the practice of sticking close to the way the Hebrew works rather than paraphrasing it, so people can get as close to the text as possible.

I am grateful for the way the *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* enabled me to see a number of these points about common words.

1. Isaiah 41:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Isaiah 48:18 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Arie van der Kooij, “Servant or Slave,” in Melvin K. H. Peters (ed.), *XIII Congress of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies:* *Ljubljana, 2007* (Atlanta: SBL, 2008), 225-38, and his references. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Isaiah 45:4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Isaiah 49:23. Likewise in 42:25 the problem with the Judahites was not that that they didn’t know that they’d been set on fire by Yahweh. It was that they didn’t acknowledge it. See further 41:20, 23, 26; 43:10, 19; 45:3, 6; 49:26; 52:6; 55:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. By the word fright, worship, terrified, and feared. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and the Ancient Near East* ( Jerusalem: Magnes/Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1988), pp. 13-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)