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Hebraisms in English versions of the Bible

A Hebraism is a linguistic element borrowed from Hebrew by another language. In addition to loanwords (such as shekel, cherub, and Sabbath; \(\rightarrow\) English, Hebrew Loanwords in), Hebraisms include semantic loans, phrases, and language traits such as peculiar syntactical forms, rhetorical devices, and imagery. Many Hebraisms entered the English language through Bible translations, even from languages other than Hebrew. Most significantly, since the the earliest English translations were renderings of the Latin Vulgate (and not from the Hebrew original directly), Hebraisms in Old and Middle English versions of the Bible are based on those mirrored in the Latin text (Hashimoto 2008). In addition, given the Semitic style of both the Septuagint and the New Testament, Greek was a further indirect source of Hebraisms (Rosenau 1902:81-86; McGrath 2001:264).

The Old English Heptateuch (c. 1000) renders Gen. 1.1 as follows: 
\textit{On angynne gesceop God heofonan and eordan}. Although the subject-verb inversion is natural in Old English, the word order can be traced back to the Latin source (\textit{In principio creavit Deus caelum et terram}) and
ultimately to the Hebrew original, which is rendered word for word by
the Vulgate: בְּרֵאשִָ֖ית בָּרָ֣א אֱלֹהִ֑ים אֵ֥ת הַשָָּםַ֖יִם וְאֵ֥ת הָאָֽרֶץ
haš-šāmāyim wa-ʾēṯ hā-ʾārêṣ.

The first complete English Bible, produced by John Wycliffe and his
followers in the late 14th century, was likewise translated from the
Vulgate. As such, Latin continued to be a vehicle for Hebraisms, as in
the use of redundant verbs of speaking. In the early Wycliffite version,
for example, Jer. 44.25 reads These thingus seith the Lord … seiendo; the
wording faithfully reproduces haec inquit Dominus … dicens, with the
participle rendering the Hebrew infinitive לֵאמֹ֗ר ‘to say’, used to
introduce direct speech.

The 16th-century versions of the Bible in English – most notably
Tyndale’s (1530 [Old Testament]), Geneva Bible (1560), and Bishops’
Bible (1568) – were translated from the original languages. In their
wake comes the famous King James Version (KJV, 1611), also translated
directly from the original Hebrew and Greek, and which drew heavily
on its 16th-century precursors. One is not surprised, accordingly, to find
“every page replete with Hebrew idioms” (Rosenau 1902:164). The
authorized status of KJV made it the most influential English Bible by
far. Its significant impact on the English language and literature,
ascribable to its long-lasting authority in a society where public and private Bible reading was widespread, guaranteed the acceptance and incorporation of numerous Hebraisms into the English language – with many or most speakers not even aware of them (McGrath 2001:259).

A survey of the Hebraisms contained in KJV was provided by William Rosenau, who divided them into two classes (Rosenau 1902:87-128): a) lexicographical Hebraisms, i.e., literal English renderings of Hebrew words and phrases, preserving the original Hebrew meaning; and b) syntactical Hebraisms, i.e., the preservation of constructions demanded by the Hebrew syntax, yet alien to English.

Lexicographic Hebraisms can convey an unusual range of meaning, which normally would be distinguished in English by a variety of words, yet it is expressed by one term in the “relatively limited vocabulary of Hebrew” (Norton 2000:423). Thus flesh, KJV’s rendering of the Hebrew בָּשָׂר bå̄śå̄r, can denote ‘meat’ (Lev. 7.17), ‘body’ (Job 4.15), ‘kinsman’ (Gen. 37.27), ‘creatures’ (Gen. 6.13), ‘mankind’ ( Isa. 40.5), and ‘pudenda’ (Lev. 15.2, 3, 7). Similarly, the meaning of brother is extended to include relatives (Gen. 14.16), fellow countrymen (Judg. 14.3), or members of the same caste (Num. 8.26); it can be used even to address strangers (Gen. 29.4) or to denote likeness, e.g., I am a brother
to dragons (Job 30.29). *House* can be a palace (*Pharaoh’s house*, Gen. 45.16) or the temple (*house for the name of the LORD*, 2 Chr. 2.1); the same term can be metaphorically used to refer to a dynasty (*the house of Saul and the house of David*, 2 Sam. 3.6), a family (*house of their fathers*, Num. 1.2) or a nation (*house of Israel*, Exod. 16.31). In line with the Hebrew use of זֶרַע zera‘, its English equivalent *seed* can denote posterity (Gen. 3.15) and race (Isa. 1.4).

Some adjectives are rendered according to their basic and commonest Hebrew meaning, thus acquiring peculiar connotations: in the sentence *and the man was very great* (1 Sam. 25.2), calqued on והאיש גָּדוֹל מְאֹד wə-hāʾ-ʾīš gå̄ḏōl məʾōd, the use of *great* for ‘wealthy’ is a Hebraism.

Lexicographic Hebraisms are also to be found in the peculiar usage of some verbs, such as *keep* for ‘observe’ (Exod. 31.16) and *hear* for ‘listen’ (Deut. 3.26; yet not in the idiom השם בקול šå̄maʿ bə-qōl ‘listen to the voice of’, which is appropriately rendered *obey*: Deut. 21.18). Biblical Hebrew imagery is retained in KJV’s usage of other verbs, such as *melt* for ‘tremble’ (Ps. 46.6), *return* for ‘repent’ (2 Chr. 6.38), and *turn* for ‘cease’ (1 Sam. 12.20).

The English idiom *know someone in the biblical sense* (Ayto...
2009:199) testifies to awareness of the euphemistic usage of know for ‘have sexual intercourse’ (Gen. 19.5); other English idioms arose from quotations of KJV’s Hebraisms, such as gird up thy loins (2 Kgs 4.29), lick the dust (Ps. 72.9), heap coals of fire upon his head (Prov. 25.22).

Syntactical Hebraisms include the following:

• Use of plural where a singular is expected, e.g., heavens, reproducing the Hebrew plural שָׁמַיִם šå̄mayim (Gen. 2.1, etc.).

• Phrases reflecting the Hebrew use of apposition, such as Moses my servant (Josh. 1.2) whereas the natural English order would be my servant Moses.

• Faithful reproduction of cognate accusative, i.e., a construction where a noun is the object of a verb from the same stem: vowed a vow (Gen. 28.20) for ‘made a vow’; dreamed a dream (Gen. 37.5) for ‘had a dream’; their service which they serve (Num. 18.21) for ‘the service which they render’. Most noteworthy is the use of cognate accusative in passages where it does not occur in the Hebrew text: פֶּן־אִישַּׁן הַמָּוֶת pɛn-ʾīšan ham-må̄wɛṯ, lit. ‘lest I sleep the death’, is rendered lest I sleep the sleep of death (Ps. 13.3).

• Prolepsis, i.e., anticipation of a noun taken from a dependent clause and made the object of the verb: God saw the light, that it was good
(Gen. 1.4) - meaning ‘God saw that the light was good’ - is a word for word rendition of הָֽא֥וֹר כִּי־טוֹב way-yar ʾēlōhīm ʾēt-hā-ʾōr ki-ṭōḇ.

• Expression of the superlative by using a genitive: servant of servants (Gen. 9.25), Lord of lords (Deut. 10.17), vanity of vanities (Qoh. 1.2), song of songs (Cant. 1.1), king of kings (Ezek. 26.7), and many others. Though alien to English, this form has not only become sufficiently familiar to infer the meanings (‘the lowest servant’, ‘the most exalted lord’, ‘the greatest vanity’, ‘the most excellent song’, ‘the mightiest king’), but also productive in forming new phrases (Norton 2000:423).

• Use of genitive where an adjective would be expected, namely for materials (e.g., jewels of silver, and jewels of gold ‘silver and golden jewels’ [Gen. 24:53]; altar of stone ‘stone altar’ [Exod. 20.25]) or attributes (men of truth ‘honest men’ [Exod. 18.21]).

• Use of preposition with noun for an adverb, such as in haste for ‘hastily’ (Exod. 12.11); this option is not alien to English, yet it could be regarded as a Hebraism as far as the source language may have exerted an influence upon the translator’s choice.

• Redundant use of pronouns with repetition of the subject: they
went both of them together (Gen. 22.6); the LORD your God he shall fight for you (Deut. 3.22).

• Coordinate verbs (i.e., parataxis) where the English usage would tend to subordination (i.e., hypotaxis): created and made (Gen. 2.3); God spake unto Moses, and said unto him (Exod. 6.2).

• Pervasive use of the conjunction and, where either a different connective or no conjunction at all would be expected; it mirrors the widespread usage of the Hebrew conjunction -ו-, which has a much wider range of meaning than English and bears.

Advances in biblical scholarship during the 19th century drew attention to the need for a revision of KJV; both the Revised Version (1885) and the American Standard Version (1901), however, did not reflect the change in English usage. Even the 1952 Revised Standard Version (RSV), although it profited from new understanding of the Hebrew text and discarded archaisms that hindered modern readers from comprehension, nevertheless stayed as close to the KJV traditional phrasing as possible.

In the second half of the 20th century, new approaches to translation found their fulfillment in the production of modern
committee-translated versions, which broke the continuity with the KJV tradition and were aimed at reproducing the original meaning in natural English. As set forth in the preface to the 1985 edition of the Jewish Publication Society Tanakh (NJPS, 1962-1985), the translators “rendered Hebrew idioms by means of their normal English equivalents”; a particular emphasis is put on the new “rendering of the Hebrew particle waw, which ... had the force not only of ‘and’ but also of ‘however’, ‘but’, ‘yet’, ‘when’, and any number of other such words and particles, or none at all”. Similar guiding principles were behind the New English Bible (NEB, 1970), whose translators endeavored “to avoid anachronisms and expressions reminiscent of foreign idioms” (NEB’s Introduction to the Old Testament). As for the Good News Bible (GNB, 1976), there was “no attempt to reproduce in English the parts of speech, sentence structure, word order and grammatical devices of the original languages” (GNB’s postface: Information about the translation). Other completely new translations also deliberately avoid syntactical Hebraisms, for “thought patterns and syntax differ from language to language” and “faithful communication of the meaning ... demands frequent modifications in sentence structure”, as stated in the preface to the New International Version (NIV, 1978). As for lexicographic
Hebraisms, some degree of biblical imagery is generally retained, especially when the meaning is clear: שׁוּב ‘return’ for ‘repent’ (2 Chr. 6.38) is rendered turn back by NJPS, NEB, and NIV; an exception is GNB, which has repent. On the other hand, the euphemistic use of know (Gen. 19.5) has been abandoned for be intimate with (NJPS), have intercourse with (NEB), or have sex with (GNB, NIV).

A tendency is observable in most modern versions to eschew original imagery when it entails earthy language: an idiom referring to male human beings, מַשְָתִּין בְּקִיר ‘one who urinates against a wall’ (1 Sam. 25.22, 34; 1 Kgs 14.10; 16.11; 21.21; 2 Kgs 9.8), is rendered literally in KJV (that pisseth against a/the wall), whereas NEB, NJPS, GNB, and NIV replace it with mother’s son, man/men, or male.

Many biblical expressions are productively used in non-biblical contexts (Crystal 2010), but not all of them are to be regarded as Hebraisms. Some are rather English archaisms (Rosenau 1902:75-79), e.g., the retention of the 2nd person singular pronoun thou/thee/thy, a distinctive trait of biblical English. Being only used as a derogatory form of address to inferiors by the end of the 16th century, it was already obsolete in KJV’s time; nonetheless it was inherited by KJV from the Bishops’ Bible (McGrath 2001:266-269). Retained by some versions
(RSV, NEB) for the addresses to God, it was left behind by the majority of modern translations.

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