

Sitting in Meeting with Ancient Voices: Isaiah, Jesus, Paul

Since I started to read the Bible in Greek and Hebrew, my shock at the contrast to the Bible I thought I knew has never gone away. In any standard English version, you find a more or less flat tone, quite pompous, without much difference from one passage to another. There is little sign of the literary excitement in the original: the humor, the sadness, the drama, the eloquence, the vivid imagery, the nuances of the arguments.

The English Bible's traditional style justifies the innumerable parodies of the Bible in popular culture, such as Ian Frazier's "Lament of the Father" (*Atlantic*, Feb. 1997):

"O my children, you are disobedient. For when I tell you what you must do, you argue and dispute hotly even to the littlest detail; and when I do not accede, you cry out, and hit and kick. Yes, and even sometimes do you spit, and shout "stupid-head" and other blasphemies...."

“And when the month of taxes comes, I will decry the wrong and unfairness of it, and mourn with wine and ashtrays, and rend my receipts....”

If the Bible is a potential source of Light, then we’re evidently listening to the Bible, through English translations alone, in a pretty shallow manner; and not with the imaginative attention to expression that we’re urged to apply to vocal ministries. I find this deficit confirmed every time I open a scholarly commentary or a Hebrew or Greek lexicon and see some of the details of how a passage was put together as a work of art.

Take Genesis 2:25 and the next verse, 3:1. [These two verses, though they end and begin different so-called chapters of Genesis, are part of the same tight, unpausing narrative: our divisions of the Bible into numbered chapters and verses was not complete until the Renaissance, and was not at all the way the Bible was read and cited in its early days.] Anyway, here’s the KJV of both verses: “And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed. Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made.”

The Hebrew sounds like this, and, word for word, means this in English:

2:25 *vai-yih-yū sheh-nay-hem ah-rūm-meem ha-ahdahm veh-ishtō veh-lō
yitbōshahshū*

And were the two of them naked the man and his woman/wife and not
were ashamed.

3:1 *veh-hah-nah-chahsh hai-ah arūm mik-kōl hai-yaht ha-sah-deh ashehr
ahsah Yahweh*

And the snake was clever[er] than all living things of the field which
Yahweh made.

Several things emerge very clearly here from the verses. One is the pun
from *ah-rūm-meem* (“naked”) and *arūm* (“clever”): they sound very
much like the plural and singular forms of the same adjective. Another
thing to emerge is that we were definitely meant to notice this pun: the
non-standard Hebrew word order in the second verse must be for
emphasis. An appropriate rendering of the whole might be “Both the
man and his wife were nude, and weren’t ashamed; but the snake, *he*

was shrewd.” But very aggravatingly, the authors of one new commentary summarizing all this¹ found reasons *not* to reproduce the pun in the translation attached to the commentary. They wouldn’t pass on what they themselves had clearly seen and heard in the text.

But I have to allow that the pun is rather startling, it would probably disrupt a modern Sunday School. But that very example puts me in mind again of one reason the Bible came into existence through the work of the Hebrew scholars in Babylonian exile: it was to teach the people back home. A basic concern in providing scripture for the illiterate “people of the land” was simply that they be able to remember it. Despite all the other culture you yourselves carry around in your heads, when are you now going to forget this part of the Genesis story, the couple being nude and the snake shrewd? The ordinary Jewish people receiving the scripture (probably) had no formal literary experience to compete with these words, which thus would have been particularly impressive.

¹ *Genesis 1-11: A New Old Translation for Readers, Scholars, and Translators*, by Samuel L. Bray and John F. Hobbins (Glossahouse, 2017), p. 108.

In even more startling contexts, the Bible has a great deal more expressive range than we tend to give it credit for. I am attached to the comforting Isaiah and the warning Isaiah, but until I learned Hebrew I was never prepared to deal with the whooping, beer-pong Isaiah, the humorous celebrant. But do you know verse 52:7, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth!”?

Several well-known facts come together here and seem to force on me a rather shocking interpretation. The first is that a common Biblical euphemism for male genitalia is “feet.” Another is that, nearly everywhere in the ancient world, the long male garments that warm and protect the legs and look seemly in social settings are not suitable for hard work or rough travel: a man had to belt his skirts up high—“gird up his loins”—when, as in this verse, he hurried as a messenger on steep mountain pathways.

Another consideration is the story of David bringing the Ark of the Covenant home to Jerusalem, and dancing with such joyous abandon

that his genitals under his skirts showed. Evidently neither the public nor God minded, but his wife Michal was mortified, and quarreled with him, and he never slept with her again; she is the one who appears foolish and wrong in this story (2 Samuel 6:16-23).

Even among the strictest Orthodox Jews today, some parts of normal decorum are supposed to go out the window at moments of supreme joy: during the Purim celebration, you are supposed to drink yourself happy. Simchat Torah or the “Rejoicing in the Torah” festival can involve not only heavy drinking and frenetic dancing, but literally climbing on the rafters.

Finally to be considered is that the verb in question, *na-a*, usually translated in this verse as “to be beautiful,” doesn’t mean to be narrowly, physically beautiful; there are other words for that. It means to be fitting, seemly, decorous. There are only two other uses of this verb in the Bible, one about tasteful and alluring jewelry (Song of Solomon 1:10), and the other in Psalms 93:5: “Holiness becometh thine house.” The body parts visible under the messenger’s hiked-up skirts are not just cute or pretty, but precious and beautiful in an acceptable,

perfect way. They are like the *Schmuck* or “family jewels” we hear of in Yiddish. The idea behind any accurate translation, it seems to me, would be something like this: “In his eager speed to bring us the good news of national salvation, the messenger is also going to bring us an eyeful; but we’ll be far too happy at his arrival to yell, ‘That’s disgusting!’

Everything about our salvation will be holy and welcome, even a state functionary’s full private endowment being bared to the general public.”

I’m reminded a little of the hectic mood of national crisis we experience in America now, and our excited hope of deliverance. Many normally staid people I know are watching obscene late-night comedy to learn about public affairs, because, they say, they can no longer stand the regular news; and I personally was countenanced by weighty Friends at a recent Women’s March when I carried, beside their earnest peace banner, a sign depicting Trump as a giant penis.

Here’s a lengthier and more consequential example of the benefits of hearing something closer to an original voice in the Bible. I’m going to read to you my version of the famous passage in John, Chapter 3, about being “born again.” Those very words, “born again,” were originally a

pun—yes, the Bible is crammed with puns. The original Greek word commonly translated as “again,” *anōthen*, also (and more literally) means “from above,” as in “from heaven.”

But the ambiguities in the passage continue. The Greeks used the same word for “heaven” and “sky,” and also a single, identical word for “breath,” “wind,” and “spirit”—all three. So what is the passage actually telling us happens when a person is baptized? How, and in what realm, is he reborn from water and “wind/breath/spirit.” How do we know, especially when we’re also told here that the “wind” can’t be pinned down?

Moreover, the verb Nicodemus uses for “to be born” is at first a purely biological one, but at length he switches to what Jesus would probably have found a more appropriately ambiguous verb, which can mean not only “to be born,” but “to come into existence,” or just “to be.”

As I listen to this Greek adaptation of Jesus’ Aramaic words (we can’t be sure he spoke any other language than Aramaic, which derives from Hebrew), my impression is less of a doctrinal *sine qua non* for

Christianity than of Jesus' gently teasing a sincere but timid and silly inquirer and leaving for us a beautiful but rather baffling meditation on holiness.

Chapter 3

1 There was a person belonging to the Pharisee school of thought,² and his name was Nicodemus; he held high office over the Jews.³ **2** This person came to him during the night, and said to him, "My Master of Torah learning,⁴ we know that you have come from God as a teacher. No

² Along with Sadducees, Pharisees were leading Jewish thinkers during the time of the late Second Temple. The views and roles of the Pharisees were complex, but it is telling that after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D., guidance in scripture interpretation and religious observance in general devolved onto the Pharisees, as predecessors of the Rabbis; this accords with contemporary accounts of them as mediators between the common people and Jewish tradition.

³ This probably means that he belonged to the Jewish high council or Sanhedrin.

⁴ "My Master" or "My Great One" is the literal meaning of "Rabbi"—it is basically a classroom honorific. It is striking that the presumably learned Nicodemus would sound like a pupil in addressing Jesus. But, he reasons, Jesus must be a great "teacher" (the standard Greek word, this time) because he is a miracle-worker:

one can perform these miracles you perform, unless God is with him.” **3** And Jesus answered him, “Here is the fact of facts: unless someone is born anew, taking it straight from the top, as it were, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”⁵ To him Nicodemus said, “How can a person be born when he’s old? He can hardly go into his mother’s belly a second time and be born, can he?” **5** Jesus answered, “This is the truthful truth I’m telling you: unless someone is born out of water⁶ and thin air—wind, breath, spirit—he cannot see the kingdom of God.”⁷

6 The thing that is born out of flesh and blood is flesh and blood, but the thing that is born out of life’s breath or the sky’s breath or God’s breath

God’s will must be manifest through his words, as through his “signs” (the literal meaning of the word commonly rendered in English as “miracles”).

⁵ Jesus makes clever use of a verbal ambiguity: *anōthen* means both “once again” and “from above”—where, of course, heaven is pictured as being; “the sky” and “heaven” are the same word in Greek.

⁶ I.e., baptism, for a long early period the only essential rite of Christianity.

⁷ Nicodemus is a literalist: he seizes on a single, blunt meaning of *anōthen*, and is sure that the physical body is the only source of life; though even the traditional vocabulary used in such discussions is extremely ambiguous. In this passage, *pneuma* unfolds as “breath” and/or “wind” and/or “spirit.”

is *that* very thing. **7** Don't be bewildered that I say to you, as an individual: all of you people must be born anew, taking it straight from the top.⁸ **8** The wind winds, the breath breathes⁹ wherever it wants to, and you hear its sound, its voice,¹⁰ but you don't know where it comes from or where it's off to. That's the way everyone is who's born out of this same airy, insubstantial substance.¹¹ **9** Nicodemus answered him back, asking, "How can the things you speak of come into birth—into being?"¹² **10** Jesus answered by asking him, "You're the teacher of all

⁸ The singular and plural of "you" are visibly distinct in Greek, which is important here; Nicodemus, visiting alone at night, is addressed as a representative of others, to whom he is expected to report back.

⁹ *Pneuma pnei*, a euphonious, playfully self-referential expression.

¹⁰ The word *phōnē* is (here, indistinguishably) either an animate or an inanimate sound.

¹¹ "Born of the spirit," the traditional translation, is an interpretive fast one. The word is the same *pneuma* ordinarily translated as "wind" in the earlier part of this same verse.

¹² Up to this point, the verb used for "to be born" normally refers only to actual birth or begetting. Nicodemus in his confusion now uses a verb, quite similar in form, that spans existence, happening, *and* birth. He is in effect answering his own question by a linguistic slippage: there is more than one way to come into being.

Israel,¹³ and you don't know these things? **11** It's true and doubly true what I say to you: what we know, we say, and we testify to what we have seen—but you people don't accept our testimony.¹⁴ **12** If I've spoken to you about all the things that are on this earth, yet you don't believe, how will you believe the things that are in the sky, in heaven, if I talk to you about *them*?"¹⁵

For me the question of Paul's voice has also been very important. The earliest New Testament writings are not by the Gospel authors but by Paul. He seems to have established all the basics of Christian theology and to have organized several Christian communities that have endured, uninterrupted, to this day. Because of his evident braininess and influence, many subsequent religious thinkers have felt free to hitch a

¹³ See the note on Verse 2 above; Jesus now turns back on Nicodemus *didaskalos*, the Greek word for a teacher, in an ironically magnified sense: Nicodemus is an *official* teacher of the *nation*.

¹⁴ Probably Jesus is using the not uncommon "royal we" of self-conscious authority. This may be humorous too in that he is pitting "all of us" (= me) against "all of you" (political and official religious authority).

¹⁵ In other words, have you no grasp of metaphor?

ride with him and hold him up at gunpoint, so to speak, then depart in a cloud of dust with his vehicle and all its contents, while he stands helplessly by the road.

They do this the way all crime is done, by ignoring the victim as a person and just exploiting something he happens to have. In Paul's case, they ignore what he's up to in the whole of a particular verse or passage—how he feels, what he thinks, what he wants done, how he expresses all this—and rip out one word and interpret it however they like.

For example, a hard-line Calvinist doctrine called double predestination (meaning that we are each somehow doubly saved or damned since before the beginning of time) depends heavily on the single verb *prooridzō*. The verb occurs only three times within the genuine letters of Paul. One time is at 1 Corinthians 2:7: "But we speak of God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed [here's our verb] before the ages for our glory." The point here is what humans can't truly know about God's wonderful plans for them; these words obviously don't support a "I'm in, you're out" theology.

But the really badly abused verses are Romans 8:29-30, which in the King James goes: “For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate [here’s the verb again] to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate [our verb again], them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.”

I recently reassured by email a reader who had been told, on the basis of these two verses, and particularly on the basis of the verb *prooridzo*, that because he did not believe in predestination, he was going to hell. I pointed out, among other things, that the verb looked as if it had been chosen for use in this latter quite playful and witty passage merely because it rhymed and alliterated with other words there. *Prooridzō* is, anyway, in its original context not at all a pointedly intellectual or religious word; non-Pauline uses in the Greek Bible look pretty ordinary, according to the standard scholarly Greek lexicon, the Liddell and Scott: from the entry there, I understand that the word’s first instance outside scripture is in a pagan erotic novel of the 3rd c. A.D. (Heliodorus 7.24). One thing that the ancient novel did regularly was to

send up colloquial and pretentious language. If *prooridzo* was a thing, either in common or pseudointellectual parlance or in documents now lost, it was conceivably an officious coinage like our “pre-board” or “proactive.” In this passage, Paul may use the word *prooridzo* merely because he is goofy with joy, and to express that musically, he needs a word starting with the preposition *pro-* (“before”—and there weren’t that many such words in Greek), because he uses the preposition *pro* independently in this clause too. (Redundant expressions were emphatic as well as jingly in ancient languages). Also, he is alliterating with P and R sounds extensively in the original Greek of this sentence. I would tentatively translate *prooridzo* with a silly coinage of my own, “pre-decree.”

To me, a further decisive consideration inclining me toward a playful interpretation is that when Paul is in fact talking formulaic and fundamental abstractions, he uses words we find also in Plato and the Stoics; *prooridzo* is not such a word. Most of his readers wouldn’t have known this; but they would have known how formal writing is supposed to affect them, emotionally, artistically, so that the writer’s experience of conviction could be conveyed to them via the care he took to get that

experience across in words. Here it's conveyed, by the form of the sentence, that God has **CARED** for **THEM**, **ARRANGED EVERYTHING FOR THEM**, since **FOREVER AND UNTIL FOREVER**, WITH **EMPHATIC AUTHORITY**. That's what these verses said in the original language, because that's how they sounded; they are a pile-up of celebratory sound. But they're not a theological formula; it was several hundred more years before theology, as it's practiced now, was invented.

I didn't add in my email message to my reader, but I could have, that a poetic flight about God's infinite and incomprehensible foreknowledge of an individual would have been familiar to Paul (Psalm 139, all about God's knowledge that is too wonderful for us, including knowledge of us even before we were born, and even before we were conceived); Paul, as usual, burbles expansively on from existing scripture: but it's now not just individuals who can partake of the infinite through God's loving provision for them, but whole communities; it isn't just the Jews, but gentiles too.

I'm sorry to end this lecture on a polemical note, but that is sometimes where the plain words of the Bible's authors bring me.

