

Biblical Hebrew and Modern Hebrew: How Much Do They Understand?

Ray Pritz*

1. Introduction

There are many reasons for revising a Bible translation. One of the most common is the speed at which language evolves. The older the translation, the more pronounced will be these linguistic anachronisms, the greater the need to revise the text.

Examples from traditional translations are abundant, but we will take just a few from the King James Version (KJV). In several places¹⁾ the reader encounters a “unicorn”, which, in today’s English, is an entirely mythical animal. The Hebrew word **אֶרְנַן** designated a very real animal, albeit one whose identity is not sure today.²⁾ In KJV Philippians 4:6 the reader is told to “be careful for nothing”, where today’s English would use “anxious” or “worried”.

In KJV Psalm 119:147-148 the prayers of the psalmist “prevent” the dawning of the morning and the night watches, while Psalm 88:13 is even bolder: “in the morning shall my prayer prevent thee”. “Prevent” in King James English translates the Hebrew root *q-d-m*, which means to precede, to come before, and in some cases to welcome. It was a good translation in the seventeenth century, but it will not work in today’s English.

Many words in the KJV vocabulary look familiar, but cannot mean what they mean today, words like ouches, canon, botch, or road. Other words simply mean nothing at all to the modern reader: bruit, caul, blains, and sackbut.

* Ph.D. in Early Church History at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Consultant to the Bible Society in Israel. raypritz@gmail.com.

1) Num 23:22; 24:8; Deu 33:17; Job 39:9, 10; Psa 22:21; 29:6; 92:10; Isa 34:7.

2) Edward R. Hope, *All Creatures Great and Small: Living Things in the Bible* (New York: United Bible Societies, 2005), 101-105.

But one does not have to wait four hundred years to notice that words in a translation have become obsolete or have undergone a change of meaning. Languages evolve quickly, and most modern translations will undergo several revisions during a single lifetime. Among English versions the New International Version has seen three revisions since the full Bible was published in 1978. The French Louis Segond translation, completed in 1880, has been revised twice in the last forty years. The Bible was translated into Spanish by Casiodoro de Reina in 1569, revised by Cipriano de Valera in 1596, and since that time has undergone more than a dozen revisions, most of them in the last forty years.

These languages were active, moving with their cultures from generation to generation, from century to century. Everyone knows that there was an ancient Hebrew and now there is a Modern Hebrew. However, the process from old to new Hebrew is not analogous to the transition from Jacobean to modern English.

Hebrew, of course, evolves like any other spoken language. Even in Biblical Hebrew scholars have identified lexical changes between earlier and later books.³⁾ But Modern Hebrew is not the product of gradual changes since the time of the Bible. In fact, the official language of the State of Israel today is not much more than one hundred years old.

Hebrew ceased to be spoken as a mother tongue around the second century A.D. After that it was employed in worship and literature until the latter eighteenth century with the Jewish equivalent of the Enlightenment. Hebrew only began to be spoken again as mother tongue early in the twentieth century, after a hiatus of some seventeen hundred years.

Many challenges accompanied the revival of an ancient language in a modern setting. These focused especially on a lack of terms in the areas of science and technology. In many cases a Hebrew root was used and given a new form that never appears in the Bible. Some words were borrowed from other languages, but many were taken from the Hebrew of the Bible and applied to objects and ideas that did not exist in Bible times.

Before looking at places where an Israeli is likely to misunderstand a biblical word or phrase, it should be said that, even with little or no background in

3) See the extensive bibliography in Aaron Hornkohl, "Biblical Hebrew: Periodization", G. Khan, ed., *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

Biblical Hebrew, a person who speaks and reads Modern Hebrew can understand a significant proportion of the Old Testament text. Children in secular Israeli schools first read the book of Genesis at the age of seven. While unfamiliar grammar must be explained, a high degree of vocabulary will be understood.

2. Causes of misunderstanding of Old Testament texts by speakers of Modern Hebrew

2.1. Words that have a different meaning⁴⁾

תִּשְׁמַל

As we have said, many Bible terms were pressed into service for modern technological developments. In Ezekiel's description of the chariot in his first chapter, he twice (Eze 1:4, 27) uses the word תִּשְׁמַל. The word is unique to Ezekiel (It is used one more time in Eze 8:2.), and its meaning has long been debated. In today's Hebrew תִּשְׁמַל is the word for electricity.

אֶקְדָּח

The word אֶקְדָּח is *hapax legomenon* in Isaiah 54:12. There it seems to describe the appearance of precious stones. The word may be related to the glow of burning coals, or, reading a *reš* for the *dalet*, something resembling an ice crystal. In either case, it indicates something that shines or sparkles. It is not intuitive, then, that this became the Modern Hebrew word for a handgun, a pistol.

מִקְשׁ

Biblical Hebrew has many words for traps used in hunting⁵⁾. Several of these

4) Abba Bendavid, *Biblical Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew* (in Hebrew), 2 vols. (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1967-1971).

5) For a list of fourteen terms and a discussion of issues related to translating them, see Ray Pritz,

terms are used metaphorically of misfortunes that should fall to the enemy of a writer. The most frequently used is the noun מוקש with other words from the same root, יקוש, נקש, and the verbs יקש and קוש. While modern Israeli Hebrew uses מוקש to designate a trap (most often, as in the Bible, in a metaphorical sense), it is most frequently used of an explosive landmine.

Along this line, another Bible word which can be anachronistically misunderstood by speakers of Modern Hebrew is the root used today for explosions and explosive material. The most common term for an explosion is נִפְצַץ and words derived from the same root. In the Old Testament this root indicates smashing or shattering, or the instrument (like a war club) with which one smashes.⁶⁾

Other military terms

With the preceding words we have examples of how technological developments have been adjusted for. In the biblical narrative we will not find armored tanks or aircraft or paratroops jumping out of airplanes. Modern Hebrew has not tried to employ a Bible word for “tank”, using the transliteration טנק.⁷⁾ It does include tanks under the general domain of שָׁרְיוֹן, which in the Bible describes personal bodily protection worn by a soldier.⁸⁾

The need to find a word for airplane was solved by coining a new word based on a *hapax legomenon* in Job 9:25-26. Job complains of his fleeting days, comparing their passing to the speed of an eagle swooping down on its prey. For the movement of the eagle Job uses the word יָטוּשׁ. In Modern Hebrew a *samek* replaces the letter *sin* giving *yatus* (יָטוּס), flies. From this is constructed the word for airplane, מָטוּס.⁹⁾

A person who jumps out of an airplane wearing a parachute is a צָנָהָן. The verb

The Works of Their Hands: Manmade Things in the Bible (New York: United Bible Societies, 2009), 36-38.

6) Job 16:12; Jer 23:29; 50:21; Eze 9:2; Hab 3:6.

7) The first Israeli-designed and built tank was called מְרַכֶּבֶה, the term used in the Bible for a chariot.

8) R. Pritz, *The Works of Their Hands*, 104-106.

9) A second word is also in use, although now less commonly. It is אָוִירֹן. This word derives from a similarity to the French *avion*, substituting the mishnaic Hebrew word אָוִיר, which was derived from Greek ἀήρ, air.

צָנַח occurs in Joshua 15:18 and Judges 1:14 to describe the action of dismounting from a donkey. The element of “descending” made it useful for the various aspects of parachuting. Here, of course, there is no chance that the modern Israeli reader will understand that Caleb’s daughter is parachuting from her donkey.

Seasons of the year

Even though there are essentially two major seasons in Israel, rainy and dry, with very short transitions between them, it is customary to speak of four seasons. The four words used for the seasons are all taken from the Bible, but not all of them carry the biblical meaning. The word for spring in Modern Hebrew is אָבִיב. This is given as the name of the first month of the year,¹⁰ which indeed comes in the spring. It is also the name of a stage of ripening barley, which happens in the spring.¹¹ The word אָבִיב never, however, specifically designates a season.

In Song of Solomon 2:11-13 we find this extended description: “the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance.” (RSV) The word translated by RSV and most translations as “winter” is סִתְיִי; it is unique to this verse. It is clear from the events mentioned that it is a description of the springtime and that “winter” is the correct translation. In today’s Hebrew סִתְיִי (or סִתְיִי) is the word for the autumn season.

The word for winter in Modern Hebrew is חֶרֶף. This is also its meaning in most of its occurrences in the Old Testament.¹² However, in two places חֶרֶף seems to speak of the autumn months. In Jeremiah 36:22 King Jehoiakim is said to be sitting in בֵּית הַחֶרֶף, the חֶרֶף house, in the ninth month, which corresponds to mid-November until mid-December. Similarly, in Proverbs 20:4 RSV it is said of the lazy person that he “does not plow in the חֶרֶף; he will seek at harvest and have nothing.” Plowing was normally done after the early rains in the fall. So at

10) Exo 13:4; 23:15; 34:18; Deu 16:1.

11) Exo 9:31; Lev 2:14.

12) Gen 8:22; Psa 74:17; Isa 18:6; Amo 3:15; Zec 14:8.

least twice the word הַרְף, which in Modern Hebrew is “winter”, indicates a time in the fall of the year. This means that, in at least some cases, the meanings of the words for “autumn” and “winter” have been reversed between Biblical Hebrew and Modern Hebrew.

Thoroughfares

The Bible has numerous words for thoroughfares, both between settlements and inside them.¹³⁾ Most of these are used in Modern Hebrew, but biblical texts will often be misunderstood, as the meanings have changed.

הַרְף

The word הַרְף generally indicates the area outside an object, and this is indeed how it is used in Hebrew today. However, in the Bible the point of reference is frequently a house or other structure in a settled area, and so הַרְף or the plural הַרְפוֹת indicates what is outside the house, that is, a “street”, which is normally the proper rendering. Because it is never used in this way in everyday Hebrew, the reader is liable to misunderstand.

רְחוֹב

On the other hand, a very common word for street (appearing on every street sign on every corner in a town or city) is רְחוֹב. In the Bible רְחוֹב maintains its basic meaning רְחֵב (wide, broad), a broad place, and it indicates a town square or marketplace. Since it generally appears in the context of a town or city, it is easily misunderstood to carry its modern meaning of “street”.

שׁוּק

Ironically, the common modern word for a marketplace, שׁוּק, is used in the Bible for a street.¹⁴⁾ Thus, in Song of Solomon 3:2 in the Bible text the bride

13) R. Pritz, *The Works of Their Hands*, 163-166.

14) Pro 7:8; Ecc 12:4-5; Sol 3:2.

says she will go into the city's streets and squares (or marketplaces), while in Modern Hebrew it sounds like the order is reversed: marketplaces and streets.

In all of the cases in this section the modern Israeli reader is liable to read into the text his or her understanding of the word according to its present-day lexical meaning. A mechanism is needed to obviate such misunderstanding. Until it becomes possible to provide a full modern translation, this will need to be done by means of notes accompanying the text.

2.2. Orthography

Until this point we have focused on lexical differences. There are other areas where differences between Biblical Hebrew and Modern Hebrew can be confusing. One such area is orthography, the way words are written and spelled. This is a relatively minor challenge for the Israeli reader. Most of the texts an Israeli will read in an average day, personal correspondence, newspapers (digital or printed), and novels are written without vowels. This lack is compensated for by the addition of *waw* or *yod* in places where there might be misunderstanding. While Israeli children learn to read the vowels from the very beginning of their reading experience, the habitual practice of reading without vowels as they grow older causes them frequently to ignore the vowels when they are present in a text. Compensating for orthographical differences between Biblical and Modern Hebrew is a matter of mindset. They can understand the text if they stop and read it all, including the vowels. It would not be appropriate in an unvoweled textual commentary simply to insert vowel substitutes.

2.3. Syntax

Somewhere between lexical and orthographical influences on understanding are differences in syntax. Connective words like אשר or conjunctions like כי function differently in Modern Hebrew than they did in Biblical Hebrew.

Biblical Hebrew employs the *waw*-consecutive form, prefixing the letter *waw* on a verb form in order to change its tense or aspect. This device is lacking in today's Hebrew. Where an Israeli encounters it in an isolated phrase, he will normally understand it. However, in many biblical passages it is not always

clear—even to scholars—whether a text indicates past or future action. This is frequently reflected in differing translations of a given phrase.

2.4. Hapax legomena

About 1,500 words appear only once in the Bible.¹⁵⁾ However, most of these are not unique roots and are unique only because they have a particular prefix and/or suffix. Their meaning can be derived with little difficulty by comparison with other words with the same root. For example, the root הָרַס appears over forty times in the Old Testament with the meaning of “destroy”. Three *hapax legomena* are derived from הָרַס: in Isaiah 19:18 הָרַס, in Amos 9:11 הָרַסְתִּיו, and in Isaiah 49:19 הָרַסְתִּיךָ. The verb הָרַס and its derivatives are very common in Modern Hebrew. Since its range of meaning is similar in both Hebrews, it presents no difficulty to the modern reader.¹⁶⁾

Of the *hapax legomena* in the Old Testament, over four hundred are words that are not clearly related to other words with the same root.¹⁷⁾ Some, as we have seen in the cases of הַשְׁמַל and אֶקְדָּח, were taken over in the revival of Hebrew with little or no regard to what might have been their biblical meaning. In such cases, the reader will often know intuitively that the word cannot mean in the Bible what it means today. While it is important to avoid misunderstanding, the goal of the translator is to engender understanding, as far as that is possible.

How is it possible to derive a reasonably accurate definition of a word that appears only once in Scripture? The problem is not a new one, of course. Even at a time when Hebrew was still being spoken in the land of Israel,¹⁸⁾ Jewish

15) In rabbinic literature these are called “words that have no brother or friend.”

16) This is graphically illustrated in the Bible Society’s forthcoming annotated edition of the Masoretic text. The annotations themselves use the word הָרַס about one hundred times to explain other words that carry the same meaning but are not well understood today.

17) These were listed already by Emil G. Hirsch, et al., “Hapax Legomena”, *Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York; London: Funk and Wagnalls company, 1906); <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/7236-hapax-legomena> (Jan. 29. 2016.). See also Frederick E. Greenspahn, *Hapax Legomena in Biblical Hebrew: A Study of the Phenomenon and Its Treatment since Antiquity with Special Reference to Verbal Forms* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1984).

18) This was later than is commonly thought. See Steven E. Fassberg, “Which Semitic Language Did Jesus and Other Contemporary Jews Speak?”, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74:2 (2012), 263-280; Shmuel Safrai, “Spoken and Literary Languages in the Time of Jesus”, R. Steven Notley, Marc Turnage, and Brian Becker, eds., *Jesus’ Last Week: Jerusalem Studies in*

scholars struggled with some single-appearance words.

The Rabbis did not know what was meant by וְתִרְמָמְךָ סִלְסֵלָה (Pro 4:8). One day they heard the handmaid of the household of Rabbi say to a man who was curling his hair, “How long will you be *mēsālēsēl* with your hair?” The Rabbis did not know what was meant by בְּמַטְאָטָא וְנִטְאָטָא תִּיהִי (Isa 14:23) of destruction, till one day they heard the handmaid of the household of Rabbi say to her companion, “Take the *t’tit*’ [broom] and *t’ty* [sweep] the house”. The Rabbis did not know what was meant by Cast upon the Lord וְיִהְיֶה, (Psa 55:23) and he shall sustain thee. Said Rabbah b. Bar Hanah: “One day I was travelling with an Arab and was carrying a load, and he said to me, ‘Lift up your *yēhab* and put it on [one of] the camels’.” (*Babylonian Talmud*, “Rosh Hashanah” 46b)¹⁹

The two rabbis mentioned in the passage, Rabbi (Judah the Patriarch) and Rabbah b. Bar Hanah, both lived in the third century A.D. When they were confronted with words they did not understand in the Bible text they were aided by two people who presumably had no Bible expertise: a maidservant, and an Arab camel driver. The knowledge of the maidservant shows that Hebrew was still being used by Jews. The same talmudic passage recalls other words that the maidservant knew, words that are not found in the Bible and were unknown by the rabbis.

2.4.1. Cognate languages

The encounter with the Arab demonstrates how other languages could be used to clarify something unclear in Hebrew. Reference to cognate languages is a useful tool, albeit one that must be applied with caution. Ancient Semitic languages shared many common words and roots. The meanings sometimes differed between languages, but where other solutions are not available, reference to a cognate language is an option.

Languages most frequently referred to are Acadian, Ugaritic, Aramaic, and Arabic.²⁰ To illustrate we may look at an example of a word elucidated by reference to Acadian. Proverbs 27:9 is one of those many verses that, at first

the Synoptic Gospels, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 225-244.

19) The translation is that of the Jews’ College/Soncino English Talmud (1952).

20) H. R. Cohen, *Biblical Hapax Legomena in the Light of Akkadian and Ugaritic* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1978).

glance, look like all the words are simple and understandable. ESV renders it thus: “Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel”.

Indeed, for the average Israeli reader, the first half of the verse is simple enough: the words are all familiar, and they carry the same essential meanings in today’s Hebrew. However, while the words in the second phrase are familiar enough, they might mean quite a variety of things. The uncertainty arises from words with multiple possible meanings, from significant differences depending on what vowels are used, and even from how the words are divided. RSV, for example, gives “but the soul is torn by trouble”²¹⁾, while the Hebrew Old Testament Textual Project gives as an alternate rendering, “the sweetness of a friend (is better than) a sweet-smelling wood”.

For this phrase the Bible Society’s textual note says, “מְעֵצַת-נֹפֶשׁ more than fragrant trees; here the word נֹפֶשׁ is a collective noun for ‘trees’ (see Jer 6:6). נֹפֶשׁ [normally meaning ‘soul’ or ‘self’ in Modern Hebrew] has the meaning ‘fragrance’; this is on the basis of comparative linguistics: in Acadian the word *nipšū* means smell, fragrance (see also the term כְּתִי הַנִּפְשׁ in Isaiah 3:20).”

2.4.2. Parallels

Over one third of the Old Testament text is poetry. One common element of Hebrew poetry is parallelism. In some cases a true *hapax legomenon* is found in parallel with a word whose meaning is clear. This can provide a useful hint as to the meaning of the unique term. By way of example we may take the word מִלְתְּעוֹת in Psalm 58:7. It is parallel to the word שִׁנָּיִמוֹ, “his teeth”. שֵׁן is the common word for tooth in both biblical and Modern Hebrew, and the parallel gives a clear meaning to the unique מִלְתְּעוֹת.

2.4.3. Archaeology

On occasion archaeological discoveries shed light on the meaning of a rare or unique word in the Bible.²²⁾ In 1 Samuel 13:21 we encounter the *hapax*

21) REB is similar: “but cares torment one’s very soul”. This reflects the rendering of the Septuagint καταρρήγνυται. Combining the words מתק רעהו (and a small emendation), yields מתקרעה, “tears itself”, introducing, by the way, a new *hapax legomenon*.

22) In this category one may include Bible *hapax legomena* that are found in non-biblical material at Qumran. See, for example, Noam Mizrahi, “The Linguistic History of מדהבה: From Textual

legomenon פִּיִּם in the context of agricultural implements that were taken by the Israelites to the Philistines to be sharpened. Older translations of the Bible (KJV, Reina-Valera) understood the פִּיִּם to be another implement. However, beginning in the twentieth century archaeologists unearthed many small weights inscribed with the word פִּיִּם; they weighed about 7.5 grams.²³⁾ It is now clear that פִּיִּם was the amount to be paid for the service of sharpening.

3. An interim solution

The examples given above and many more like them mean there are many places where average Israeli readers of Scripture are liable to misunderstand a word that is familiar to them in everyday speech. In addition to this potential pitfall, in hundreds of passages there are very difficult words that are entirely unfamiliar to the speaker of Modern Hebrew. Most of the book of Job, for example, is essentially unintelligible to today's Hebrew speaker. Equally difficult are the opening chapters of Isaiah and numerous other chapters throughout the prophets.

One might think the obvious solution would be a Modern Hebrew translation of the Bible. Until today no such translation has been completed.²⁴⁾ If, as we have suggested above, there is normally a conservative resistance to a new translation where a well-established and beloved translation already exists, how much more should we expect resistance to translating *into Hebrew* the original Hebrew text.

Over twenty-five years ago the Bible Society in Israel initiated a project to translate the Old Testament into today's Hebrew. Outside financial support was

Corruption to Lexical Innovation", *Revue de Qumran* 26:1 [101] (2013), 93-116.

23) William G. Dever, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries and Biblical Research*, Samuel and Althea Stroum lectures in Jewish studies (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989), 33.

24) There are some almost-exceptions to this statement. In 2013 HaGefen Publishers completed and published a full translation of the Old Testament for children in five volumes. Another full translation, under the series title "Yesod Malchut", appeared recently (no date given). The latter translation, in twelve volumes, is presented interlinearly with the Old Testament text and in many places is more of a commentary than a translation. It is ironic that the State of Israel is one of the very few states in the modern world that has no Old Testament translation in the official language of the state.

found, and as a first step a professional public survey was commissioned to determine public opinion and to learn what approach might give the highest probability of success. To the considerable surprise of the Bible Society, approximately fifty percent of those questioned were in favor of the publication of such a translation. Perhaps even more significant, about thirty percent of respondents indicated that the availability of such a translation would increase the amount that they read the Bible (meaning, in the Israeli context, the Old Testament). Unfortunately, the financial supporter later backed out, and the translation project has yet to be undertaken.

3.1. An annotated Hebrew Old Testament

Because a Modern Hebrew translation is not available, and because Israeli readers are unable to understand significant portions of the text, an alternate (and only partial) solution is being undertaken by the Bible Society in Israel. In an edition to be published in 2016, the Masoretic Text will be accompanied by an extensive set of notes explaining difficult or potentially misunderstood words and phrases.

An example from Nahum 2:4-5

By way of illustration, we bring here the explanations of the annotated edition at Nahum 2:4-5. The bracketed material explains why a note was felt to be necessary.

4 מִגֵּן גִּבְרִיָּהוּ מְאָדָּם אֲנָשֵׁי-חַיִל מְתַלְעִים בְּאֵשׁ-פְּלִדוֹת הַרְכָּב בַּיּוֹם הַכִּינּוּ וְהַבְרָשִׁים הָרְעֵלוּ:
5 בְּחֻצוֹת יְתְהוּלְלוּ הַרְכָּב יִשְׁתַּקְּשְׁקֹנוּ בְּרַחֲבוֹת מְרֵאִיקָהּ פְּלִפְיָם פְּבַרְקִים יְרוּצְצוּ:

Vs 4, מְאָדָּם – אדום (red). [The form מְאָדָּם could be understood to mean “from man” or “more than man”.]

מְתַלְעִים – לבושים בגדים שצובעו אדום, בצבע שהופק מתולעת שני – מתלעים (dressed in clothes that were dyed red, a color manufactured from *tola'at shani*) [The word מְתַלְעִים will not be understood. The note explains its derivation from the word for

“worm”, a phrase used frequently in the Pentateuch.]

– בְּאֵשׁ־פְּלִדוֹת הֶרְכָּב בְּיוֹם הִכְנִינוּ
 המילה פלדות מופיעה רק כאן בכתובים, פרושה אולי לפיד אש; ביום שהכינו את המרכבות
 נוצצו כמו לפיד אש; או, המרכבות נוצצות כמו ביום שיצרו אותן (The word פלדות appears
 only here in Scripture, possibly meaning a torch; on the day they prepared the
 chariots, they shone like burning torches; or, the chariots shine like they did on
 the day they were brand new.) [The *hapax legomenon* is explained, tentatively,
 because its meaning is not sure. Two possible meanings of the whole phrase are
 given.]

הַבְּרָשִׁים – הַחֲנִיתוֹת אוֹ הַחִיצִים שֶׁנַּעֲשׂוּ מֵעֵץ בְּרוֹשׁ – הַבְּרָשִׁים
 (The javelins or the arrows that were made from cypress wood.) [The word הַבְּרָשִׁים means “cypresses”. In the
 context it means some aspect of the weaponry used by the attacking army.
 Unexplained, it could sound like trees are being prepared.]

שֶׁמֹּרְעֵל רַעַל בַּחֹדֶם; אוֹ, רוֹעֵדוֹת, מִתְנוֹפְפוֹת – הִרְעָלוּ
 (The tips are poisoned; or, They tremble, or they are shaken, brandished.) [The first meaning will present itself to
 the modern reader, but the second will not.]

Vs 5, בַּחֲצוֹת – בְּכַבִּישִׁים (in the streets) [A word that has changed meaning]

רָצוּם בַּמְהִירוֹת, בִּשְׂגֵעוֹן; אוֹ, מִבְּרִיקִים – יִתְהוֹלְלוּ
 (They run quickly, crazed; or, they sparkle.) [Modern Hebrew would only carry the first meaning, but the second is
 possible and would not be evident to the modern reader.]

מִלֵּה שֶׁמוֹפִיעָה רַק כֹּאן, יִשְׁמִיעוּ רֵעַשׁ גְּדוֹל – יִשְׁתַּקְּשְׁקוּן
 (A word that appears only here, they will make a great noise.) [This *hapax legomenon* has come to
 mean “rattle” in Modern Hebrew.]

בְּרֵחוֹת – בְּכִירוֹת הָעִיר (In the city squares) [In Modern Hebrew רֵחוֹת means
 “streets”.]

יִרְצְצוּ – מִתְרוֹצְצוֹת הֵנָּה וְהֵנָּה (They rush about here and there.) [The Hebrew root

is in use in Modern Hebrew, but the form is unfamiliar and is difficult to understand.]

4. Conclusion

One must still wait for the day when Hebrew native-language speakers can pick up the Bible and read it with no more misunderstandings than a reader in Quechua or Pidgin or Hausa. Until the time when resources become available to produce a modern Hebrew translation of the Old Testament, it will be necessary to employ temporary measures such as textual footnotes which identify and explain words and phrases that are liable to be misunderstood.

<Keywords>

Modern Hebrew, revision, language evolution, linguistic footnotes, *hapax legomenon*.

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<Abstract>

Biblical Hebrew and Modern Hebrew: How Much Do They Understand?

Ray Pritz
(The Bible Society in Israel)

Bible translations undergo periodic revisions, in part because all living languages are fluid and evolving. The language of the Old Testament underwent its own evolution over the hundreds of years between the composition of the first books and the last ones. Such a process of change continued until Hebrew ceased to be a spoken language in the Second or Third Century AD.

There followed a hiatus of close to seventeen hundred years, when attempts were begun to revive the language. The Hebrew spoken in the State of Israel today is the result of many forces, including artificial creation of words to adapt the language to the modern era and the normal dynamics of spoken language evolution from early in the Twentieth Century until today.

Until now there exists no translation of the Old Testament in Modern Hebrew. As a result, while biblical Hebrew terms are very frequent in today's Hebrew, there is a constant danger that "familiar" words and phrases actually carry meanings that are significantly (or completely) different from what they meant in Bible times. This means that the average Israeli reading the Old Testament will encounter many words and grammatical forms that are quite unfamiliar. On the other hand, she or he is liable to read a passage, seemingly with understand, but they will have quite misunderstood what was meant by the original writer.

This article looks at these potential pitfalls of misunderstanding. A number of specific words are discussed, some of them hapax legomena, others that today have very different lexical meaning from what they carry in the Bible. There is also a discussion of tools that can be used to derive the possible meanings of hapax legomena.

There is then a discussion of a project undertaken by the Bible Society in Israel to produce an annotated edition of the Old Testament in which explanations are given of words and phrases that the modern Israeli will find

impossible to understand. The annotations also cover expressions that are likely to be misunderstood because of lexical differences between biblical and modern Hebrew. An example is given from Nahum 2:4-5.