

general, we will use the word "symbolist" to describe the plays referred to in the last article of the series. Nevertheless, symbolism, which sees the world of meaning as existing on two planes, a superior or inner plane of quasi-eternal forms and an inferior or outer plane of fluctuating and temporal ones, is quintessentially binary, and the analogy of sexual conjunction best describes the manner in which these planes are seen to interrelate.

Finally, the reader should be cautioned that mathematical terms are used as analogies and images. The form of art, continually approaching that of mathematics, may never be reduced to it. In this approach to the subject I am following a method with certain similarities to that used in contemporary musical analysis.

TRANSLATING THE OLD TESTAMENT

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The Writings teach that the Hebrew language was uniquely suited to the purposes of Divine Revelation in the ultimate degree. They give us an inspiring picture of the beauty and power of the Old Testament in the original tongue. At the same time, however, they present us with a serious problem; for insofar as the Hebrew is unique, its functions cannot be served by any other language; whatever belongs to Hebrew alone is inevitably lost in any translation of the Word.

This raises several key questions. What is it about Hebrew that makes it the ideal vehicle for the Old Testament? How much should the translator try to carry over the formal elements of Hebrew grammar, idiom, and style into the receptor language? Is the Old Testament's use to us different from its use to the Jews? Do we destroy its function by translation? I would like to offer some very tentative answers to these problems.

The central question from which to begin is this: What is the letter of the Word, specifically in the Old Testament, *for*? Among the Jews, who were a representative of a church, there was no knowledge of the internal things in the Word, but only a reverence for the external things. The letter of the Word served to keep

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them in external order, and this made possible the conjunction between heaven and men on earth. But if they had at the same time known of the internal things of the Word, they would have profaned them, and all conjunction with heaven by means of them would have been destroyed.¹

We, too, must pass through a state like that of the Jews—sensuous, rebellious, external—when the Old Testament's strict laws serve to keep us in outer order. But those in the New Church must develop beyond this state; for them, the letter of the Word has a deeper purpose. It has always been the means of conjunction with heaven, for the human race as a whole and for individuals. It has always served as the "basis, containant and support" of all higher degrees of truth.² But we read:

The state of the church was completely changed by the Lord's becoming the Word in ultimates. All the churches that had existed before His advent were representative churches, and could see Divine truth in the shade only; but after the Lord's coming into the world a church was instituted by Him that saw Divine truth in the light. . . . Before His coming into the world the Lord was indeed present with the men of the church, but mediately through heaven, whereas since His coming into the world He is present with them immediately.³

It is the *understanding* of the Word that makes the church. "The Word is spirit and life according to the understanding of it, for its letter if not understood is dead."⁴ Among the Jews there was only a shallow penetration of the meaning of the Word; the Christian Church had a deeper insight; but in the New Church, that understanding can be richer and more complete than ever before.

In order that man may truly understand the Word, he must read it with an affection for truth. Such an affection is stirred, and as if assisted, by seeing the beauty of the Word shining through the literal sense.

The Writings teach very strongly that every individual must draw doctrine for himself from the sense of the letter of the Word, and that it must also be confirmed by the sense of the letter.⁵ It is my belief that the Writings themselves must be included in this statement. The three revelations which we have are all on the natural plane—they all serve as an ultimate for higher planes of truth. The Old Testament, however, appeals to the lowest degree

¹ AC 3479–80.

³ SS 99.

⁵ SS 53–59.

² See SS 27–36; AE 1085:2.

⁴ SS 77.

of man's natural mind. It contains within it the truths of doctrine expressed in the New Testament and most clearly in the Writings, and can support and confirm those truths for us.

This then is the chief purpose of the Old Testament for the New Church: together with the New Testament and the Writings, its letter is to be the source of doctrine and the confirmation of it. Although the ideal would be to read the original Hebrew, when this is impossible I believe a good translation *can* serve the purpose.

A New Church translator of the Old Testament must face many problems. Given the teachings of the Writings about the Hebrew letters, the vowels, the right-to-left writing, the correspondences of the words and idioms, the lack of tense in the verbs, the continuity of ideas, and the poetic style of the Word, what should he try to convey in his translation? ⁶ I would like to deal with each of these problems in turn.

The Writings frequently say that the original Hebrew letters resemble to some extent the writing in the third heaven, and that their actual forms have a correspondence, from which the celestial angels can immediately understand the meaning of what is written.⁷ We are also told that the Jews "have the Word written in the ancient Hebrew language where all the letters are curved, because in such a letter the Word has a more immediate communication with heaven."⁸ Moreover, Providence has ensured that not even a letter of the original has been mutilated.⁹

These teachings indicate that the letters themselves of the Old Testament are very important; yet we must accept the fact that

* For discussion of this issue by New Church authors, see for example: Report of a Meeting of the General Convention, *New Church Life*, 1901: p. 376. Review of New Church Magazine, *NCL*, 1902: pp. 42-43. W. F. Pendleton, "The Translation of the Word," *NCL*, 1903: pp. 661-65. E. S. Price, "The Translation of the Word," *NCL*, 1904: pp. 77-83. Report, *NCL*, 1905: pp. 502-03. William H. Alden, "A New Church Version of the Scriptures," *NCL*, 1922: pp. 581-85. W. Cairns Henderson, "The Revised Standard Version," *NCL*, 1953: pp. 136-38. Dennis Duckworth, Herbert G. Mongredien, and Norman Ryder, "Editors' Preface," in *Pentateuch*, (The General Conference of the New Church, 1970), pp. v-viii. Norman Ryder, "The Ancient Church and the Old Testament," *The New-Church Magazine*, Vol. 94: Number 674, October-December 1975, pp. 105-21.

¹ SS 3, 71, 90; AC 9349: 2; SD 4671, 5578, 5620; HH 260; TCR 241; *De Verbo* 14.

² LJ, Post. 261.

³ AE 1085: 2.

they are lost as soon as we translate. We can, however, be encouraged somewhat by the following considerations. First, we ourselves do not lose the ability to understand the Word; we are quite incapable of reading the meaning in the forms of the letters as the highest angels can. Second, the celestial angels have not been cut off; they can still perceive the celestial sense when we read the Word, apart from the Hebrew letters. Third, the Hebrew letters which we have are not the original, curved, ancient Hebrew letters of which the Writings speak;¹⁰ instead they are the Aramaic "square letters" adopted after the Babylonian captivity.¹¹ It is not clear just how much these letters carry the correspondence which the curved letters had. Finally, once when Swedenborg spoke with an angel about the Hebrew letters, the angel was permitted to explain the meanings of only three of them.¹² The Writings themselves explicitly reveal the meaning of only one Hebrew letter.¹³ Why is this? I suggest that it is to prevent us from becoming mystical about the letters, instead of concentrating on the meaning as we should.

The letters of the Hebrew alphabet all represented consonants originally. Three were used to represent certain long vowels as well, but most of the vowels were not indicated at all, and the reader had to infer them. Without the vowels, the meanings of the words were left more ambiguous, for it is often vocalization which distinguishes the many words formed from a common root.¹⁴ The reader thus had to supply the meaning according to the surrounding context and according to his own affections. The Writings even say that the vowels were originally left out

so that the sense of the letter was known from the interior sense, but not the interior sense from the sense of the letter, which rather happens when the vowels are adjoined; wherefore he who perceives the sense of the letter from the interior sense better understands what is written in the Hebrew language without vowels than with them.¹⁵

¹⁰ For discussion of "The 'Ancient Hebrew Letters'," see C. Th. Odhner, *NCL*, 1915: 270-73.

¹¹ Moshe Greenberg, *Introduction to Hebrew* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), p. 15.

¹² SD 4671.

¹³ This letter, *he*, refers to what is infinite and eternal (SS 90; *De Verbo* 14). The meanings of several other letters can be inferred. See E. E. Jungerich, "The Arcana of the Hebrew Language," *NCL*, 1912: 288-94.

¹⁴ For examples, see Greenberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-19.

¹⁵ SD 2631

However we are also told that without the vowels, anyone can form the literal sense according to his own fancy, and pervert it in many ways.¹⁶ There are also places in the Word where it is almost impossible to understand the meaning without the vowels. Therefore it was later permitted that the vowel points, indicating a complete vocalization, be attached by the Masoretes.¹⁷

The sounds of the Hebrew vowels express affections. The sounds of *o*, *u*, and *a* belong to the celestial degree, whereas *e* and *i* belong to the spiritual degree.¹⁸ This, along with the ambiguity of the original vowelless writing, is inevitably lost in a translation. There is nothing a translator can reasonably do to preserve it in another language.

New Church scholars have set forth the idea that the right-to-left movement of Semitic writing represents the celestial genius; the left-to-right "Japhetic" form represents the spiritual; and the top-to-bottom "Hamitic" form represents the natural.¹⁹ This seems to be a derived doctrine based on the correspondences of left and right,²⁰ rather than a direct teaching of the Writings. But it certainly seems to make sense. This representative function of the Hebrew, too, must be lost in a translation. Fortunately, it seems to be comparatively unimportant, and its loss should not significantly affect our benefit from reading the Word.

When dealing with the Hebrew letters, vowels, and direction of writing, the translator has no choice but to abandon them. His problem is much greater when it comes to translating actual words. Should he look for one-to-one equivalents between the words of the two languages with which he is working? Should he translate every word? Should idioms be left in their literal form?

¹⁶ SD 2414.

¹⁷ The Writings never explicitly say that the Masoretes were Divinely inspired in this work, although they do raise the question—see SD 2414. However, they do say that it was of the Divine Providence that the Masoretes counted the letters of the Old Testament—see SS 13; *De Verbo* 14; also LJ 41. We are also told that the Jews have been preserved for the sake of the Old Testament in the letter. See DP 260: 3; AC 3479; LJ Post. 254, 261. The problem of whether or not to use the Masoretic text is beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁸ SS 90; SD 2414, 2631, 5620; HH 241; *De Verbo* 14.

¹⁹ See C. Th. Odhner, "The Hebrew Language—A Study," *NCL*, 1915: p. 730.

²⁰ For example see AE 1168: 3: to look "from left to right" = "from truth to good."

The Writings say that in the books of the Old Testament “every thing, and every word, contains an internal or spiritual sense, wherefore not one word can be taken away from them”²¹ and “indeed, each word is a prop and a support to [the Word’s] celestial and spiritual truths.”²² Even the omitted words are intentionally left out for the sake of the internal sense, as we see in the story of Uzzah touching the ark. In the Hebrew it says that Uzzah “put forth”—and the word for “his hand” is omitted, so that the angels need not perceive that something so profane touched what is holy; for the hand represents man’s own power.²³

There does not seem to be sufficient reason to believe that we must try to have exactly the same number of words in a translation as in the Hebrew, in spite of these statements in the Writings. I suggest that it is in the Hebrew that not a single word can be removed; in translation, to carry over two words into a single word, or to render a single word as a whole phrase, is sometimes necessary, and is not the same thing as adding or subtracting words in the original. Some examples will help to illustrate the point.

Some words *have* to be removed when we translate the Hebrew. For instance, the word *eth* has as its function to indicate the definite direct object of the verb—much like an accusative case ending in Latin. Since English indicates the direct object by its position in the sentence, and not by any written symbol, *eth* is simply dropped in the translation. But it has not been ignored—and had it not been there in the Hebrew, we would not have known so clearly how to translate the sentence.

Other words cannot be translated literally. *Elohim* is a plural form meaning “God.” The Writings explain that the Old Testament speaks of God in reference to truth, and of Jehovah in reference to good, and truths are many, but good is one.²⁴ This is why the word for God is formally plural—but we cannot make it plural in English.

Moreover, we cannot always translate the same Hebrew word with the same English term. The Hebrew word *aph* means “nose”; but it is used idiomatically in a phrase that has reference to “anger.”

²¹ LJ 41. See also SS 13: 4; AC 621.

²² SS 35: 4.

²³ AC 878.

²⁴ AC 10154. Compare AC 3623 on why “lives,” “heavens,” and “waters” are often plural or dual in the Hebrew. These, however, *can* be translated as plurals without causing confusion.

Thus when we read *charah apo b-* we must translate it "his anger burned (or was kindled) against . . ." and not "his nose burned against. . . ." The same Hebrew word in the dual form *apayim* can be used to mean "face." We could hardly translate it as "(two) noses." Where a Hebrew idiom can be literally translated so that it becomes an understandable metaphor in the receptor language, this should certainly be done. But clearly it should not be done where the result is either humorous or nonsensical. The literal meaning should then be made available in a footnote for the student of the internal sense; but we should not try to duplicate the original words in our translations, at the expense of our understanding of and reverence for the Word.

Even if we do try to be literal, and translate word for word, we will often find that there is no one-to-one equivalence in the words we choose. The Rev. Enoch Price, in an article published in 1904, gave an interesting example:

The word *chittah*, in Hebrew, signifies wheat, and is so rendered by all English translators. There is not much doubt but that in its root meaning it signifies what is red, or yellow, or reddish yellow, from the color of the grain. . . .

The word *wheat*, in English, as in all Indo-European languages, is directly connected with the root *white*, since this is the grain that produces white meal or flour.

Now there never need be any question about translating *chittah*, wheat; but is it not evident after all that wheat does not exactly translate it? ²⁵

Yet another problem is posed by the fact that a single Hebrew word can mean many things—not only in idioms like the one discussed above, but in common speech. The *Spiritual Diary* tells us:

There are many words in the Hebrew language which contain a complex of many ideas in one, from opposite to opposite, so that the sense cannot be understood but from the series, and this from the interior, otherwise than is the case in other languages, because they [the Jews] were in representatives, so that in one general idea might be many things.²⁶

In the case of such words, it seems logical that all the different ideas which are involved in the literal sense are reflections of the internal sense.²⁷ Every reader of the Writings is familiar with the way they give different internal meanings for the same word, depending upon

²⁵ E. S. Price, *NCL*, 1904: p. 79. ²⁶ SD 2833; see also 2631.

²⁷ See AC 10217. In relation to this idea, see also L. W. T. David, "The Interpretation of Hebrew Names," *NCL*, 1928: 20-28.

the context in which it is used ;²⁸ it is useful to note that this is true of the literal sense as well. But how are we to reflect this in English, or any other language? Clearly we cannot do it fully; our quotation above points out that the meaning of Hebrew words must be understood "otherwise than is the case in other languages." We will seldom be able to find a single word in the receptor language which does justice to its Hebrew counterpart in all contexts. Wherever the same word *can* be used meaningfully, this should be done; but if it obscures the meaning, a substitute should be found. For the general public, it is more important that the translated Word make sense in the letter, than that it attempt to provide a perfect ultimate for the spiritual sense. If it *could* do the latter, there would be nothing unique about the Hebrew. But it must do the former if we are to be able to draw doctrine from it.

The statements in the Writings about the importance of preserving the original Hebrew words must be balanced with other statements which show that, in translating the Word as in understanding it, the words are not the essential thing. For example, the Writings speak of a certain Hebrew word which is variously translated as "serpent," "dragon" or "whale." It does not matter which translation is used, we are told for they all have the same general signification.²⁹

The *Spiritual Diary* speaks of critics who translate the Word, and warns that by seizing upon a particular meaning of a given word they twist and distort the genuine sense in a thousand ways. Because of their tendency to cling to the bare words, we are told, these critics cannot translate as well as others, even though they may have a better grammatical knowledge.³⁰

We also learn from the Writings that a real grasp of the beauty of the internal sense comes not from a word-by-word exposition, but from seeing it in unity and fulness. Swedenborg writes:

I . . . have been permitted . . . to see the Lord's Word in its beauty in the internal sense . . . ; not as it is while the words are being explained as to the internal sense in detail, but with all things both in general and particular brought together into a single series of connection, which may be said to be the seeing of a heavenly paradise from an earthly one.³¹

²⁸ For a single example of this, see AC 10409.

²⁹ AE 714: 29-30.

³⁰ SD 1950-51, 2040-41.

³¹ AC 1772.

Yet another problem in the translation of the Old Testament is the lack of tense in Hebrew verbs. Instead of tense, there are two aspects, perfect and imperfect. A textbook written by a Jewish scholar tells us :

The perfect . . . denotes action that is completed and over with, or a state achieved and complete. It . . . is conventionally rendered by the English past, though the precise nuance depends on the context.

Often . . . the perfect denotes the English present perfect or present; i.e., it is expressive of an accomplished act or state whose effect is presently felt or apparent.³²

The imperfect aspect expresses action or state as unaccomplished, continuing, or customary. It corresponds generally to English present and future. . . . When expressing continuity or custom . . . , it may refer to the past as well. . . .

Occasionally (especially in poetry) the imperfect is used as a simple past tense, like the perfect. . . .

The imperfect also expresses that which may, could, should, is wished, or is supposed to be.³³

In addition to these multiple uses of the two aspects, a construction known as the "waw-consecutive" reverses their normal functions, so that in a sequential narration, the imperfect consecutive will usually refer to past events, and the perfect consecutive to future events.³⁴

The Writings say that the timelessness of Hebrew exists because time is irrelevant to the internal sense.³⁵ In English we must be satisfied with using our traditional tenses, translating as best fits the context. But it would be useful to inform the reader, in an introduction or a footnote, that the tenses are superimposed. If in reading about the Lord giving the Ten Commandments, for example, we are able to think of "And God spoke all these words" as also meaning "God speaks all these words" (with an effect in the present) and "God will have spoken all these words" (to eternity), how much more will we be able to see that He is speaking them to us and to all men.³⁶

"And God said" or "and Jehovah said" are used repeatedly in

³² Greenberg, op. cit., pp. 45-46.

³³ Ibid., p. 49

³⁴ See *ibid.*, pp. 74-77; and Alfred Acton, *An Introduction to the Study of the Hebrew Word* (Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania: Academy Book Room, 1925), ##223-27, pp. 166-69.

³⁵ AC 618.

³⁶ See Acton, op. cit., #227, pp. 168-69.

the Word to connect a series together.³⁷ Even more familiar is the very frequent use of "and" or "it was" or "it came to pass." The Writings tell us that this is for the sake of continuity, reflecting the continuous internal sense "flowing from one state of a thing into another."³⁸ We read:

And it came to pass. That this signifies what is new, is evident from the signification of it was, or, it came to pass, as involving a new state. . . . In the original tongue the meaning was not at first distinguished by punctuation, but the text was continuous, in imitation of heavenly speech; and instead of punctuation marks, *and* was used, and also, *it was, or, it came to pass.* This is why these words occur so often, and why it was, or it came to pass, signifies something new.³⁹

Since the Writings say that these connecting phrases are used *instead* of punctuation marks, it could be argued that in English, punctuation and paragraphing would perform the same function, without any need for the constant use of "and." My own tendency, however, would be to retain the translation of "and"; it has become an accepted part of Biblical style, and should not be distracting to the New Church reader. At the same time, it is a symbol and a reminder of the flowing connection of all things in the internal sense. It also helps to provide the feeling of rhythmic movement which is a stylistic feature of the Old Testament, especially in certain parts.

The Writings compare this flowing rhythm to the speech in chorus of good spirits and angelic spirits.

They have no thought about the words or ideas, for into these their sentiments flow spontaneously. No words or ideas flow in which multiply the sense, or draw it away to something else, or to which anything artificial adheres, or that seems to them elegant from self, or from self-love, for such things would at once cause disturbance. They do not inhere in any word; they think of the sense; the words follow spontaneously from the sense itself. . . . The form of the speech has a cadence in accordance with the connection and unanimity of the society. Such was once the form of songs; and such is that of the Psalms of David.⁴⁰

This rhythm is an element of the poetic style⁴¹ which is so important in the Old Testament. The Rev. C. Th. Odhner enumer-

³⁷ AC 7191.

³⁸ AC 4987.

³⁹ AC 5578.

⁴⁰ AC 1648.

⁴¹ The Writings speak of four styles in the Word—the historical, the prophetic, the representative style derived from the Most Ancient Church, and the style of the Psalms. See AC 66, 1139; SD 2721.

ated several important features of the poetry of the Word.⁴² First of all, it is essentially religious, expressing the love between the Lord and the Church. Monotheism is the essence of its beauty. Second, it is the most simple, natural and spontaneous form of poetry—it is not, like most modern poetry, a “fixed form of art.” Third, it is sensuous, realistic and full of life. Its descriptions are vivid, and faithful to nature’s beauty. Fourth, it is not bound to a set number of syllables, but possesses a freedom of movement; the external form depends upon the inner emotion being expressed. And yet it is naturally metrical.

Another very important characteristic of Hebrew poetry is the use of pairs of words which seemingly repeat the same idea. Some common examples are “answered and said,” “justice and judgment,” “be glad and rejoice.” These pairs, however, should never be abbreviated to one term in a translation, no matter how redundant they may seem to the casual reader.

They are not repetitions, but one has relation to good and the other to truth; and both taken together make their conjunction, and thus one thing. Thence also is the Divinity of the Word, and its holiness; for in every Divine work there is good conjoined with truth, and truth conjoined with good.⁴³

We are also told that if we are aware of this, we will be able to tell where the Word treats of good and where of truth while we read it, especially—but perhaps not only—in the original language.⁴⁴

Similar parallels may be found in longer phrases in the Old Testament. Couplets and triplets are common in Hebrew poetry. It has been suggested that the couplets reflect the marriage of the Lord and the Church, and of good and truth. The triplets mirror the trinity of love, wisdom and use; the three degrees of heaven; the Trinity of the Lord.⁴⁵ A supreme example of both may be found in the Levitical blessing given at the end of the sixth chapter of Numbers:

Yehowah bless you and keep you ;
Yehowah make His face shine on you and be gracious to you ;
Yehowah lift up His face on you, and give you peace.

The parallels and repetitions in the Word must be kept in any translation. They are a confirmation of the beautiful internal

⁴² C. Th. Odhner, “The Poetry of the Word,” *NCL*, 1915: pp. 306-07.

⁴³ SS 81. See also AC 801; SS 84. ⁴⁴ AC 8314: 2.

⁴⁵ C. Th. Odhner, *NCL*, 1915: pp. 385-87.

things which they represent, and as such they can be understood in English as well as in Hebrew. Moreover, wherever a passage in the Old Testament is known to be poetry, it should be set apart in the translation by its poetic form. A translator should do all he can to let the beauty of the Word's poetic style shine through in his translation. Poetic beauty and doctrinal truth must not be separated; they are another aspect of the "conjugal style" in the Word, and we need to be able to see them together.

To summarize: in translating the Old Testament, it seems that we must resign ourselves to giving up the correspondences of the Hebrew letters, the vowels, the right-to-left movement of the writing, the ambiguity of meaning in the roots of words, the timelessness of the verbs, the full impact of some of the idioms, and the natural cadence of the Hebrew language. This is a great deal to give up, but it cannot be helped as long as translations remain necessary. We must either read Hebrew, or settle for what is less than ideal. However, we *can* try to reflect the continuity of the Word by translating "and" and "it came to pass" where we find them in the Hebrew; we can retain the parallel words and passages; we can keep idioms literal as long as they still make sense. And we *must* struggle to maintain clarity in the letter of the Word, insofar as it is clear in the original, for it must serve as a source and a confirmation of doctrine. We *must* try to keep the beauty of the Word intact, so that a love for the letter of the Word and a sphere of worship may accompany the search for doctrine, and so that the tremendous power of the Divine love and wisdom may be visible to us in this ultimate form.

The translator has a great responsibility. He should approach his work with a knowledge of what the Writings teach about the internal sense of the Word; with a clear idea of what purpose the translation of the Old Testament is to serve for its New Church readers; and above all with humility and reverence. Part of his responsibility is, simply, not to impose himself upon the translation—not to "get in the way" of the message that the Lord is giving. If he does his work well, the translated Word will still be a means of conjunction between the men of the church and their God.

"The Lord is present with a man, and at the same time is conjoined with him, according to his understanding of the Word; for according to this understanding the man has truth and thence faith, and also love and thence life." ⁴⁶