

LYNELL ZOGBO/ERNST R. WENDLAND, *Hebrew Poetry in the Bible*. A Guide for Understanding and for Translating, (United Bible Societies; New York 2000) xiv.246pp.; ISBN 0-8267-0037-3.

Since Bishop Robert Lowth's famous monograph *De sacra poesi Hebraeorum praelectiones academicae Oxonii habitae* (1753), introductions to, and general treatments of Hebrew poetry have often graced the shelves of academia. The limited bibliography appended to the text of the present volume (pp.219-223) includes some of the more known books in the field that appeared the last twenty five years or so: Kugel 1981; Alter 1985; Berlin 1985; Alonso Schökel 1988. And yet this number in the UBS series 'Helps for Translator' breaks new grounds.

Lynell Zogbo and Ernst R. Wendland work with the United Bible Societies as translation consultants. Their responsibilities include monitoring translations in a number of nations, training translators, and helping them as they struggle to render into their own languages and cultures the contents and beauty of the Hebrew and Greek text of the Christian Bible. As such, this volume is only partially addressed to academics, that is, to their colleagues who would use this book as textbook in their training sessions of Bible translators. This book is a teaching aid as the 'Questions for Reflection' at the end of each of the eight chapters of the book demonstrate. But the

monograph may be read with profit also by the translators themselves, individually, or in teams. In the Preface it is these translators who are explicitly mentioned as the 'target audience' of this enterprise. "The book is meant as a practical guide for the translator with limited or no background in Hebrew. Its main purpose is to convince translators that, in certain contexts, rendering biblical poetry as poetry in their own language is a worthy goal. It suggests ways translators can compare the linguistic techniques of the Hebrew text with those in their own language. In this way they can try to create the same poetic effect in their translations. It points out typical problems that Old Testament translators face and suggests ways to set out the text that will help the reader" (p.xi; cfr also p.8).

One may probably say that it was this practical intent of the monograph that was responsible for some of its strengths: straightforward and clear style of its presentation; wise selection of the material to be discussed both as regards the texts as well as the poetic techniques and features; balanced review of positions concerning the many options that the translator has to consider as he/she attempts to transfer biblical poetic forms into his/her own target language. These strengths would make of this monograph a good textbook not only for practitioners of Bible translation but also for students of theology as long as the latter will have received a good humanistic preparation. For in order to study the Bible as a literary phenomenon with profit one has to

experience the literary capacities of one's own mother tongue.

The authors of the monograph do not examine the literary phenomena and the poetic techniques employed by the biblical authors for their intrinsic beauty alone. Their concern is to show how the poetic functions played by these phenomena and techniques in the source language can be met with when the poems wherein they appear are translated into the living languages of today that often are light years away from the cultural milieu where these phenomena and techniques sounded pretty and meaningful. The questions the monograph tries to answer: Should poems in the Hebrew Bible be produced literally? And to what extent is the translator bound to reproduce the literary phenomena that the authors resorted to in order to produce the effects intended? Could he/she depart somewhat 'from the text' to attain to the same effect as the original authors, and to communicate more or less identical meaning(s)? These are the issues that the monograph addresses and which not even the academic specialist can simply ignore as he/she grabbles with the text to resolve its mysteries.

In the one hundred seventy five pages of its text, the book treats eight different aspects of the issue 'translating Hebrew Poetry'. The first three focus on Hebrew poetry itself, while in the next five chapters the subject matter is the translational side. We shall briefly visit each chapter adding short comments here

and there in the hope of consolidating the good work done by the authors of the monograph. Chapter One (pp.1-9) deal briefly with the definition of poetry in general and of Hebrew poetry in particular. The discussion of the latter had to include listing criteria for distinguishing between poetry and prose; the boulderings between the two genres are far from clear. In this part of the chapter I expected to find at least a reference to Wendland's useful list of differences given in the other UBS monograph *Discourse Perspectives on Hebrew Poetry in the Scriptures* (1994), pp. 3-5. Chapter Two tackles a more technical subject though absolute form-critical precision in the terms involved is a dream. The authors here focus on 'life setting and genres in Hebrew poetry' (pp.11-17). The words in the chapter title are reminiscent of Hermann Gunkel's *Sitz in Leben* and *Gattungen* and Gunkel's contribution for form criticism and particularly for psalms studies is also acknowledged (pp.13-15) [The title of his books as well as that of Robert Lowth appear nowhere in the monograph!]. I wonder though whether 'life setting' as described on pp.12-13 corresponds perfectly to Gunkel's *Sitz im Leben*. Besides, the present reviewer is slightly confused as to what to make of the two statements on p.11: 'Certainly by the time that David, the most well-known songwriter in the Bible, was composing, poetry had taken on a more individual flavour. Many of the psalms attributed to him are personal, referring to specific circumstances in his life.' Perhaps the

writer who penned these statements would have profited from reading the recent monograph by Harry P. Nasuti, *Defining the Sacred Songs. Genre, Tradition, and the Post-Critical Interpretation of the Psalms*, (JSOT Supplement Series 218; Sheffield 1999). Writing for non-specialists requires more accuracy of the specialist.

Chapter Three is the longest section of the introductory discussion (pp.19-60) dedicated to theoretical issues. It offers a useful description of a number of features of Hebrew poetry. Zogbo and Wendland identify some features as the ones affecting the structure of the poetic composition; here they include parallelism, chiastic structures, refrains, and Inclusio (pp.20-33). One notices with pleasure that the authors have gone beyond the schematism of Robert Lowth's classification of parallelism (pp.23-28). Stress, Meter, rhythm, alliteration, assonance, rhyme, and word play are treated under the rubric 'sounds effects in Hebrew poetry' (pp.34-40). The authors of this monograph are aware that most of the users of their book will not be able to enjoy the employment of these sound features by the Hebrew poets whose works we read, as many of the translators use for their *Vorlage* or 'base text' other translations where such 'sound effects' in the original do not feature because the language is different. For which reason, the description of the features mentioned in this subsection is understandably sketchy. More prepared translators who are capable to read Hebrew poetry in the

original, may have to supplement this description with reading from some of the titles mentioned in the general bibliography, which could be enlarged to include for instance the two specialised works of Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to its Techniques*, (JSOT Supplement Series, 26; Sheffield 1984); *Traditional Techniques in Classical Hebrew Verse*, (JSOT Supplement Series, 170; Sheffield 1994); also useful would have been Roland Meynet's *Rhetorical Analysis. An Introduction to Biblical Rhetoric*, (JSOT Supplement Series, 256; Sheffield 1998). The next bunch of features is qualified by the rubric 'stylistic features found throughout Hebrew literature' which is rather strange; this third list contains 'figures of speech' (similes, metaphor, personification, anthropomorphism [I wonder whether this should be treated with figures of speech], part-whole relationships, and 'standard figures' under which they enter metonymy), rhetorical and leading questions, hyperbole, irony and sarcasm, key words (or 'terms', p.167), and shifting persons. The use of 'Key Words' merited perhaps a wider treatment seeing that some translation 'traditions' make much fuss about it. For the use of the technique 'person shift' readers will profit also from the contribution of Lénart de Regt, *Participants in Old Testament Texts and the Translator. Reference Devices and their Rhetorical Impact*, (Van Gorcum; Assen 1999) and a paper that he has read in the joint seminar of the *Oudtestamentisch Werkgezelschap* and

the *Society for Old Testament Study* held Soesterberg, Holland, August 2000, "Roles and Person Shift in Prophetic Texts: Its Function and its Rendering in Ancient and Modern Translations".

The last part of the chapter Zogbo and Wendland describe 'poetic units': strophes and stanzas (pp.53-58), while on pp.58-60 they deal with some cases where the Hebrew poet chose to diverge from the expected pattern.

With chapter Four (pp.61-99) start what is probably the more original part of the authors in this monograph; for in this second half of their book Zogbo and Wendland discuss the translational aspects of Hebrew poetry. "We believe that it is possible and even recommended to render poetry in the source text as poetry in the translation in certain well-defined contexts," state the authors on p.61. The 'key expression' in this sentence is 'in well-defined contexts'. In this chapter they say that poetry in the source text may be rendered as poetry in the target languages on two conditions: first, that poetry play more or less identical roles in the target culture as it did in the source culture; secondly, there exist stylistic matches between the poetic expressions of the two cultures. Here Zogbo and Wendland try to show that these two conditions are fulfilled in the case of Hebrew poetry even though there may not be one to one correspondence either in the social function of poetry or in its formal expression with modern languages and cultures, so that caution is always

necessary. "Rendering the biblical text in poetic form should be a conscious decision made by the translators...It must first be determined that a poetic transfer can be made, based on thorough research of the available functional matches between the source and the target languages. This means that for every book (or even parts of each book), translators...must agree how each text will be treated in order to express its message faithfully" (p.76). And this holds good also for any formal correspondence between the two poetic traditions, that of the source and of the target languages. "If there is a formal match between poetic devices, translators must make sure that the moods and connotations conveyed by the stylistic technique match as well. Otherwise a translated poem may be interpreted in an incorrect way, or the poem may convey the wrong feeling" (p.82). Words of wisdom indeed.

The next thirty eight pages (pp.101-138) constitute chapter Five, and translators and general users of this handbook should constantly refer to this section where Zogbo and Wendland give guidelines as to how to deal with a number of problems related to the translation of Hebrew poetry. They discuss problem relating to parallel lines [this discussion deals also with word pairs, an important feature of Hebrew poetry: when to reproduce these pairs in the target language, when to 'collapse' them?] (pp.101-117); repetition and ellipsis (pp.117-121); poetic language (pp.121-130); and shifting persons (pp.131-134); towards the end of

the chapter, they describe when footnotes should be used, when a literal translation is preferable to a more dynamic one, when instead of purely translating a text it may be advisable to 'recreate' a literary composition. After the discussion of each important item, the authors would conveniently summarise the contents: cfr pp.107(word pairs), 123(translating exotic or unknown vocabulary in the source text), 130 (dealing with difficult figures of speech), 132-133 (shift of persons in poetry).

With chapter Five we have reached the climax of the monograph. In the next three chapters Zogbo and Wendland discuss minor though not unimportant aspects of translating poetry. In chapter Six (pp.139-154)they examine an issue that was not given importance in times past: of how poetic texts from Scripture should be disposed in a printed text. "... How a poem is formatted or set out on the printed page contributes significantly to how it is read and interpreted"(p.153). Chapter Seven (pp.155-163) reviews the possibility that poetic structures can help determine the meaning of a word or phrase, while the concluding chapter Eight (pp.165-175)makes suggestions as to how to deal with Old Testament poems quoted by the New Testament writers; should the translator reproduce the Old Testament citation in the New Testament as it is to be found in its original OT context, or should he/she reproduce the citation as it appears in the NT writing? What Zogbo and Wendland say in this chapter transcends the exigencies of mere

translation work, and the professional exegete will surely find it profitable to read their work.

In the Appendix are included three case studies of how biblical poetry can be translated as poetry in the target language, and the work of one translation team as they tried to establish the principles to follow in rendering Hebrew poetry in their mother tongue(pp.117-218). Besides one finds a bibliography, a glossary of the literary and linguistic terms employed in the monograph, and a list of Bible references(219-246).

The present reviewer opines that this 'handbook' should be in the hands not only of Bible translators and theology students who are handling their first arms in scholarly exegetical work, but also of biblical scholars, since the solutions Zogbo and Wendland propose for handling biblical poetry takes into account modern linguistic studies which standard training in professional Scripture studies do not always consider. And this is a must nowadays.

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