

INTRODUCTION

EXPLANATION OF SUBJECT

In the course of the critical interpretation of the Hebrew Text of the Old Testament, as conducted in the Oriental Seminary of Johns Hopkins University, frequent reference was made by Professor Haupt to the influence exerted by Hebrew lexicography and syntax upon the English of the A. V. of the Bible and thus indirectly upon the English written and spoken to-day. From time to time decided Hebraisms were indicated in the vernacular which no one but the student of the so-called "Holy Tongue" recognizes as being of Hebrew descent. This fact excited my interest and prompted me to the careful examination of the English of the A. V. and of all classical and current literature I happened to read. I found the claim verified so frequently that I concluded to show the influence of Hebrew on English by searching the A. V. for all the Hebraisms the company of translators, either consciously or unconsciously, retained. The English text was read by me several times. Expressions which struck me as Hebraisms were compared with their equivalents in Hebrew, as contained in the M. The Ancient Versions were consulted whenever necessary to show whether the apparent Hebraism came to us from the Hebrew or through some other channel. And authorities on English as well as commentaries on the Hebrew text were called into requisition to see whether the opinions advocated established other theories of origin than those at which I had arrived.

I found but very little material on the subject. Here and there I encountered some incidental indication of a Hebraism. Time and again, however, I found the confession that the Hebrew thought and speech had considerable to do in shaping and molding English thought and speech. A passage from the pen of Joseph Addison (1672-1719) is here to the point. Said Addison:

“There is a certain Coldness and Indifference in the phrases of our European Languages, when they are compared with the Oriental Forms of Speech; and it happens very luckily, that the Hebrew Idioms run into the English Tongue with a particular Grace and Beauty. Our Language has received innumerable Elegancies and Improvements, from that Infusion of Hebraisms which are derived to it out of the Poetical Passages in Holy Writ. They give a Force and Energy to our Expressions, warm and animate our Language, and convey our Thoughts in more ardent and intense Phrases, than any that are to be met with in our own Tongue. There is something so pathetick in this kind of Diction, that it often sets the Mind in a Flame, and makes our Hearts burn within us. How cold and dead does a Prayer appear, that is composed in the most Elegant and Polite Forms of Speech, which are natural to our Tongue when it is not heightened by that solemnity of Phrase, which may be drawn from the Sacred Writings. It has been said by some of the Ancients, that if the Gods were to talk with Men, they would certainly speak in Plato’s style; but I think we may say, with Justice, that when Mortals converse with their Creator, they cannot do it in as proper a Style as in that of the Holy Scriptures.

“If any one would judge of the Beauties of Poetry that are to be met in the Divine Writings, and examine

how kindly the Hebrew Manners of Speech mix and incorporate with the English Language, after having perused the Book of Psalms, let him read a literal translation of Horace or Pindar. He will find in these translations such an Absurdity and Confusion of Style with such a Comparative Poverty of Imagination, as will make him very sensible of what I have been here advancing."¹

Another passage to which I desire to call attention in this connection is one in Selden's Table Talk, which Cheyne quotes in his review of the books of Psalms and Judges in the Polychrome Bible.²

"There is no book translated as the Bible for the purpose. If I translate a French book into English, I turn it into English phrase, not into French English. I say 'Tis cold,' not 'It makes cold,' but the Bible is rather translated into English words than into English phrase. The Hebraisms are kept and the phrase of that language is kept." After citing an example, Selden remarks: "It is well enough so long as scholars have to do with it; but when it comes among the common people, Lord, what gear do they make of it?"

And no less a modern scholar than Dr. Richard G. Moulton, Professor of Literature in English in the University of Chicago, also recognizes the influence exerted on English by Hebrew when he remarks:

"The Hebrew writers of the Old Testament and their followers, the Christian Hebrews of the New Testament, have been the inspiration of those who have inspired our

¹ *Spectator*, No. 405.

² *Expositor*, April, 1898.

own writers; their style has largely leavened the style of modern English, their thought has become so closely interwoven with English thought of the last three centuries that it is impossible to sever the two.”³

In order to show how replete every part of the Bible is with expressions foreign to English, I give here in parallel columns the wording of a chapter as it appears in the A. V. and its wording according to the usage of modern English. Let us take the fourth chapter of the Book of Esther.

Authorized Version. Reconstruction of English of
A. V.

1. When Mordecai perceived all that was done, Mordecai rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and bitter cry;

2. And came even before the king's gate; for none might enter into the king's gate clothed with sackcloth.

3. And in every province, whithersoever the king's commandment and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

When Mordecai ascertained all that had happened, he rent his clothes, put on sackcloth (and covered his head) with ashes. Then he went through the city crying aloud and bitterly and advancing as far (only) as the outside of the court of the palace—for no one clothed in sackcloth was permitted to enter the premises of the palace. In every province whithersoever the king's order and decree came, intense mourning, fasting, weeping and wailing prevailed among the Jews, many of whom were clad in sackcloth with ashes (on their heads).

³ Select Masterpieces of Biblical Literature, Introduction, p. 14.

Authorized Version.

4. So Esther's maids and her chamberlains came and told it her. Then was the queen exceedingly grieved; and she sent raiment to clothe Mordecai, and to take away his sackcloth from him; but he received it not.

5. Then called Esther for Hatach, one of the king's chamberlains, whom he had appointed to attend upon her, and gave him a commandment to Mordecai, to know what it was, and why it was.

6. So Hatach went forth to Mordecai unto the street of the city, which was before the king's gate.

7. And Mordecai told him of all that had happened unto him, and of the sum of the money that Haman had promised to pay to the king's treasuries for the Jews, to destroy them.

8. Also he gave him the copy of the writing of the decree that was given at Shushan to destroy them, to shew it unto Esther, and to declare it unto her, and to

Reconstruction of English of
A. V.

When Esther's maids and chamberlains came to tell her (of this), the queen was sorely grieved and sent garments (with the instruction), that they be put on Mordecai and that his sackcloth be removed; but he would not acquiesce. Thereupon Esther summoned Hatach, of the king's chamberlains, whom the king had appointed to wait on her, ordering him to ascertain why Mordecai acted thus. When Hatach came to Mordecai in the street, in front of the king's palace, Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the sum of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews, giving him also a copy of the decree, published at Shushan, which enjoined their destruction, and asking that it be shown to Esther, and that she be requested to go to the king, petition him, and plead with him in behalf of her people.

Authorized Version.

Reconstruction of English of
A. V.

charge her that she should go in unto the king, to make supplication unto him, and to make request before him for her people.

9. And Hatach came and told Esther the words of Mordecai.

10. Again Esther spake unto Hatach, and gave him commandment unto Mordecai;

11. All the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law of his to put him to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre, that he may live: but I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days.

12. And they told to Mordecai Esther's words.

13. Then Mordecai commanded to answer Esther, Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the

When Hatach reported to Esther what Mordecai had said, Esther charged Hatach with the following message to Mordecai:

The king's courtiers and the people of the king's provinces know that any one, whether man or woman, who comes to the king in the inner court, unbidden, is put to death in accordance with the law—except the king hold out his golden sceptre to him (as a sign) that he is spared—and I have not been summoned to the king for thirty days. When Mordecai was told Esther's message, he requested that Esther receive the following answer: Do not imagine that thou alone of all the Jews wilt escape because thou art at the king's palace. If thou dost not intercede now, help and deliverance will come from

Authorized Version.

Reconstruction of English of
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king's house more than all the Jews.

another source, but thou and thy family will be destroyed. Who knows but that thou hast attained royalty in order to be of service at this time?

14. For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

15. Then Esther bade them return Mordecai this answer,

Then Esther ordered that Mordecai be answered: assemble at once all Jews of Shushan and fast for my sake. Do not eat or drink, by day or night, for three days. I and my maidens will fast likewise. And in spite of that law I shall go to the king, and if I perish let me perish.

16. Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish I perish.

17. So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him.

Thereupon Mordecai went away and acted in strict accord with Esther's instruction.⁴

⁴ Words marked () in the reconstruction of the English of the A. V. are not in the text of the A. V., but are required to bring out the sense.