

### **Question of the Week:**

***Is the poetry of the Bible the choice of the translators or of the original writers?  
Can they be considered poets in the way we think of poets today?  
Why use poetry rather than prose in Scripture?***

*Scripture: Isaiah 25:6-10; John 1:1-5, 14-17*

In Wales, every year, there is a festival called the Eisteddfod. It is a celebration of storytelling and poetry, because storytelling is how the Welsh understand themselves and the height of status in Wales is to become an exceptional storyteller. Eisteddfodau have been held for centuries in Wales, and on the one hand, they are competitive storytelling events, and on the other, they are simply a gathering where the people can hear the stories of their culture told by great storytellers in the language of their people.

The first Eisteddfod was in 1152 in Wales. Back then, storytellers were called 'bards' and bards would travel the countryside and gather communities around the fire and tell long epic tales of heroes and myths and histories of kings and creatures. The Mabinogion is the great example of these kinds of tales. Most editions of The Mabinogion are prose translations, but before it was ever written down, The stories in the Mabinogion were memorized, and they were very long poems. The bards would memorize the tales. It is easier to memorize a poem than it is to memorize prose. Why? Because a poem has rhythm, syncopation, alliteration, rhyming, parallels, repetition, and attention to the sounds of words.

Bards were considered the carriers of the knowledge of the people, and as the carriers of knowledge, they also shaped the knowledge of the people with their tales and sagas and retelling of those stories. This is what makes modern day poets different from the poets of the ancient world. In our modern day, as Ogden Nash says,

*"Poets aren't very useful/ Because they aren't consumeeful or produceful".*

In the ancient world, poets were very useful because they carried the knowledge and stories of the people.

Poetry is throughout the Bible and the reason it is used rather than prose is because poetry has the ability to communicate things that prose cannot. Rob Bell, who is a spiritual speaker from California, says poetry communicates spiritual truths in ways nothing else can.

But have I really said anything meaningful here? What is poetry doing? Mark Yakich, writer and poet, says poetry communicates ambiguity, and we as a culture are intolerant of ambiguity. Carl Sandburg says,

*"Poetry is the journal of a sea animal living on land, wanting to fly in the air",*

a poetic way of saying poetry reaches beyond itself by using words in a peculiar way and seeking to find truth in new ways.

When the Bible was translated into the King James version, several things were happening. The translators were relying on the best information they had at the time from ancient Greek and Hebrew writings for their translations. We have far more information now, so the reliability of our present day translations are far better than the King James version. But there is another reason to love the King James version of the Bible and that is because the translators were as much inventing the modern English language as they were simply translating something from one language to another. With some exceptions, the translators of the King James sought to maintain the poetics of Scripture into English.

But there are problems with that, as always. Sometimes, it is hard to tell if ancient Hebrew is written as poetry or prose. For instance, Hebrew does not rely on rhyming, because Hebrew is most often written without vowels, which gives a language with limited vocabulary and letters a tremendous flexibility in meaning and nuance.

What Hebrew does do is rhyme ideas rather than words. In theology, this is called parallelism. Hebrew often matches syllables in lines of poetry as well. Sometimes these poetic techniques are used to communicate wisdom in aphorisms, or short sayings, like in the Book of Proverbs. Other times, the techniques are used to communicate difficult and profound ideas in lyrical images, as in Psalm 126. And other times, the intention is to tell a story, as in the very first book of the Bible, in Genesis 1, which is best considered to be an epic poem of creation. But because of the nature of Hebrew, it can be hard to tell sometimes if something is written as a poem or prose. Does it matter if we read Genesis as a poem? I think it does.

(Read the first few lines of Gen 1 in Hebrew)

Hebrew poetry is meant to be at once a reflection of the rhythms of life, and at the same time to influence and mould us into its rhythms within our lives. Think of the repetition of “It was night and then it was morning” in Genesis. It repeats six times, but is unspoken a seventh time. Why? Because the language itself is seeking to evoke the practice of Sabbath on the seventh day. We are meant to adopt the rhythm of the language itself. Or, consider the rhythm and shape of memory. Listen to these lines from Psalm 137:

*1 By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.*

*2 We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.*

*3 For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.*

*4 How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?*

*5 If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.*

*6 If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.*

*7 Remember, O Lord, the children of Edom in the day of Jerusalem; who said, Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation thereof.*

Greek was the language of a powerful empire and by the time the New Testament was written, there was formal Greek and what was known as ‘street Greek’. In both forms, over the course of 1500 years, a single word can accumulate multiple meanings. Greek, like English, is a very technical language, and clarity of language was a high ideal in Greek culture. But that technical clarity becomes a problem when translating from one language to another. When a word, *anwthen*, means both ‘from above’ and ‘again’, as in Jesus telling Nicodemus, “except a person be born again” (Jn 3:3), what difference does it make if we choose ‘from above’ instead? It seems to make a difference in how we understand what Jesus is trying to say.

A translator must choose the word, and those choices change how we read things. And faced with the decision to translate something like Genesis as a poem or prose means the translator has to make some decisions about what is poetry and what it is not. As AE Houseman said,

*“I could no more define poetry than a terrier can define a rat.”*

Translation, and particularly the translation of epic poems and spiritual verse, is a

difficult thing to accomplish well. Even well-trained experts struggle with it. JRR Tolkien was a professor of philology, which is the study of languages. He was an expert in Runic, Old English and Middle English, and researched the origins of words through Germanic and Romance roots. For the Hobbit books, he created several of his own languages. He took it upon himself to translate one of the great Old English epic poems, Beowulf, which is the story of a great king and hero named Beowulf who rescued villages from the monster Grendel and her offspring. Tolkien completed the project, but never published it because he was never happy with how he had translated it. Fortunately, his son Christopher thought otherwise when he discovered the manuscript and published his father's accomplishment.

Listen to this section of Beowulf, where Beowulf and his crew are coming towards land on their boat, and hear how much is being communicated in the poetry of Tolkien's translation:

*Forth sped the bark troubling the deep waters and forsook the land of the Danes. Then upon the mast was the raiment of the sea, the sail, with rope made fast. The watery timbers groaned. Nought did the wind upon the waves keep her from her course as she rode the billows. A traveller upon the sea she fared, fleeting on with foam about her throat over the waves, over the ocean-streams with wreathed prow, until they might espy the Geatish cliffs and headlands that they knew. Urged by the airs up drove the bark. It rested upon the land.*

*(Beowulf, JRR Tolkien translation, pub. 2014)*

As Christians -- Tolkien was a devout and faithful Christian -- we understand an important thing about this world in which we live. We live in a universe created by words. The fabric of creation is woven by the words of God spoken at creation. Creation comes about by these words, "And God said..." John 1 retells the Creation story by saying,

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.*

Language, for God, is the organizing principle of creation itself. It is a mind-bending idea. And it means that how we use our words matters on a deep and fundamental level.

The words we use can reflect deep spiritual truths because we love the things of God in this world, and the words we use in poetry can express these truths in ways no other use of language can. Take this poem by Juan Ramon Jimenez (1881-1958), called "God, Sun Among the Trees". This, by the way, is a translation from the Spanish:

*Thank you, god desiring, red dawn,  
God, sun among the copper trees of this today,  
Of this again triumphant December,  
Ripening god of the early womb,  
Of the whole earth of this world.*

*The sun burned the night  
Like a flaming center,  
And now mysterious love  
Is transformed into resplendent love.*

*Your heart, sun, god, is what burns,  
And the sun, at last! Is called the heart of god.*

*(from God Desired and Desiring, 1987)*

The words we use can also express the love of language itself. The love of God and the love of language come to the same thing - a profound understanding of the creative power of language and God's love.

Take, for instance, this poem by Billy Collins, who has affirmed on numerous occasions that his poems have no overarching message except for one thing, and to him it is the most important thing. That one thing is, very simply, the love of language, and in particular the English language. Here is his poem *Bathtub Families*

### ***Bathtub Families***

*is not just a phrase I made up  
though it would have given me pleasure  
to have written those words in a notebook  
then looked up at the sky wondering what they meant.*

*No, I saw Bathtub Families in a pharmacy  
on the label of a clear plastic package  
containing one cow and four calves,  
a little family of animals meant to float in your tub.*

*I hesitated to buy it because I knew  
I would then want the entire series of Bathtub Families,  
which would leave no room in the tub  
for the turtles, the pigs, the seals, the giraffes, and me.*

*It's enough just to have the words,  
which alone make me even more grateful  
that I was born in America  
and English is my mother tongue.*

*I was lucky, too, that I waited  
for the pharmacist to fill my prescription,  
otherwise I might not have wandered  
down the aisle with the Bathtub Families.*

*I think what I am really saying is that language  
is better than reality, so it doesn't have  
to be bath time for you to enjoy  
all the Bathtub Families as they float in the air around your head.  
from *Ballistics* (2008)*

Poetry in the Bible, and throughout the world, is meant to convey deep truths that cannot be expressed in any other way. To love God is to love words, because we are a People of the

Book, and we know better than anyone the creative power of words. And knowing this, we also know the power of words to destroy and deconstruct as well. The warp and weft of the fabric of our deepest being is dependent on the thick weave of God's love for us and God's Word to us. When I say this, I don't mean you need to have a large vocabulary, or a degree in literature, or to even understand the layered nuances of how words came to be, or anything academic. What I do mean is that we, as followers of the One who is God's Word become flesh, understand deeply that words and language do things, create things, and define things.

So when language is misused, manipulated, and devalued, we know there will be great costs in very real ways - spiritually, relationally, economically, politically, materially. Consider this: when you are sitting across from someone and you say something and the person rolls their eyes and says nothing, you, as the person watching this action, can think anything you want about what the eyeroll might mean. Most often, it is a signal of contempt or dismissiveness. But you have no idea until the person tells you what they are reacting to. Likewise, if you give a great gift to someone, that someone can smile or jump up and down or any other gesture, but you have no idea if they are truly grateful for the gift unless they express in words gratitude for what they have received.

Language and the words we use, though, are more than just our reaction to what people do to and for us. Words and language create our understanding of things and people. In the ancient world, in Jesus' and Paul's time, one of the beliefs was that feelings and understanding did not come before words. In the modern world, we think that way about words, don't we? We think we have a thought and feeling, and then words are just the covering that we put on those things so people understand us. But in the ancient world, it was exactly the opposite. Feelings, experiences, thoughts, and ideas did not exist until they were spoken. Feelings and experiences were the surface level experience; language was the concrete, defining reality that created and gave meaning. Back then, we only knew sadness when we spoke it into being; we only knew joy when joyful things were said. Feelings, emotions, and ideas had no meaning until they were connected up with the one thing that connected all of us, words and language.

This is why, in Scripture, the love of God is also the love of language, and the more we learn to love and care about the words we use, the more we come to know how God and Christ are with us in the world. Speak well, then, of one another, and know that, as Paul says, *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord* (Col 3:16).

Let us end, then, with my favorite Billy Collins poem, Hippos on Holiday

***Hippos on Holiday***

*is not really the title of a movie  
but if it was I would be sure to see it.  
I love their short legs and big heads,  
the whole hippo look.  
Hundreds of them would frolic  
in the mud of a wide, slow-moving river,  
and I would eat my popcorn  
in the dark of a neighborhood theater.  
When they opened their enormous mouths  
lined with big stubby teeth  
I would drink my enormous Coke.*

*I would be both in my seat  
and in the water playing with the hippos,  
which is the way it is  
with a truly great movie.  
Only a mean-spirited reviewer  
would ask on holiday from what?  
(from, Ballistics, 2008)*

Amen