

A Soldier's Tribute

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Introduction

I know only enough Hebrew to get me into trouble. I've had a lifelong love affair with the language, picturing it, as a child, as God's aboriginal language. Later, learning about the poetic flexibility of the three-letter roots, I marveled at Cal Seerveld's translations and dreamt of translating the Psalms myself one day. I had the honor of spending a year (2010) learning both the language and its cantillations under the tutelage of Rabbi Hilda Abrevaya (the first US woman ordained as a cantor).

In my current study environment I have extremely limited space and no interlinear Bible. Nonetheless, Joel Hoffman's books, *In the Beginning* (2004) and *And God Said* (2010), and particularly his discussion of the meaning of "shepherd" in the latter book, inspired me to experiment with creating a paraphrase. Truth be told, the paraphrastic expression is my style of choice, not because it might be easier (which is debatable) but because my intended audience is today's biblical illiterates. The Psalms possess the timelessness of all great literature, but, like Shakespeare, many will never approach them. Sometimes a modernization can avoid being a bastardization and actually draw people to the original. It happened with me (with Shakespeare). In the adage, "You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink," it is my intention to make that horse thirsty.

Hoffman, an award-winning translator, is equally critical of translations that stay so close to the original that they lose the sense of Hebrew idioms and poetry (e.g., the KJV and its derivatives like the NRSV) and those that are more free-flowing (e.g., the NLT). He has no patience for the colorless paraphrase *The Message*. His goal is to bring across the meaning and the affective power of the text both in word and in context. To some extent, he admits, a full and complete translation is an impossibility, but that shouldn't stop us from trying. So, interweaving text, context, idiom, concepts, poetry, affect, register and much more, Hoffman, in the second half of *And God Said*, focuses on a dozen words/concepts that he believes have been misunderstood and therefore mistranslated in most modern Bibles.

A Shepherd's Song?

It was chapter five, "Kings and Shepherds: Who We Are," and its look at Psalm 23 that inspired me to try my hand at it. Hoffman begins by noting that shepherds were as common in biblical times as they are uncommon today. We know *what* they were but tend to be ignorant of *who* they were—what social role they played—in those days. Exodus 2:16-20 shows shepherds as fierce troublemakers (129f.). Jeremiah 25:35, 49:19, and 51:23 show them as mighty adversaries. Ezekiel 37:24 alludes to a shepherd as a great leader. Amos 3:12 has one taking on a lion. Micah 5:5 compares shepherds with rulers (parallel structure). Throughout Song of Songs (cf. 4:5) the shepherd is a romantic figure. Hoffman concludes:

The picture has four parts. First: Shepherds were fierce and noble. They were like kings and other royalty. They were powerful. Crushing a shepherd was a sign of great strength, and shepherds were used to stave off invasion. Second: the job of a shepherd was to provide

sustenance, care, and defense. Third: Shepherds were romantic. And finally: Shepherds were common. (132f.)

And yet, he continues, “None of those things is true about shepherds today” (133). Besides, a person who raises sheep (and other livestock) today is called a farmer. “The Lord is my farmer?” Do farmers compare with kings? How about “The Lord is my lawyer (a stepping stone to CEO or political office)”? Do they do hand-to-hand combat with wild animals? “The Lord is my cowboy...my zookeeper”? Finally, after trying numerous descriptors (from “knight in shining armor” to “brain surgeon”), Hoffman hesitantly lands on “hero,” a word he admits is lacking in both specificity and register but is “not as wrong as ‘shepherd’ is” (145).

The Biblical Action Hero

It was at this point that I thought of the ubiquitous action hero in the Hollywood-forged American imagination. I am neither a violent person nor have any military experience, yet I’ve seen my fair share of action moves (from James Bond to Jason Bourne) and am often moved and inspired by the (admittedly fictional) acts of heroism. Whether movies or TV shows, most of the heroes have some sort of military background. Despite political controversies between “doves” and “hawks,” all seem to honor the military hero. We might alternately consider the prowess of professional athletes, but I think there’s a commanding nuance in a soldier-leader like Colin Powell that’s missing in a sports hero like Tiger Woods. So, with “military hero” as my starting point, I dove into Psalm 23:1.

The NRSV (used throughout) reads: “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.” The LORD (or YHWH) is not a common word/concept today (except in the

movies, like “Lord Vader”). YHWH contains an infinite number of meanings (and conjectures) only one of which I felt signifies the mystery in a single, common word: God. (YHWH deserves a treatise—a lifetime of treatises—unto Itself.) Hoffman suggests the admittedly unpoetic “I shall not lack” (145; since we no longer use “want”; it’s a KJVism); I decided to expound using a “my shepherd/leader” (*ro’i*) metaphor: “God is like a military hero. With him leading my squad, what else do I need?”

Psalm 23:2-3a: “He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.” The military-action-hero myth includes the death/resurrection trope in the modified form of a seemingly fatal injury/miraculous recovery. I used this to increase the affective grip from a sheep lapping up water to a soldier bleeding out on the battlefield, maintaining the sense of “lying down” (maybe Hollywood will see this and pick me up as a writer). Also, Hoffman (2010, ch. 4) investigates the words “soul” (*nefesh*) and “heart” (*levav*) and concludes that “the Biblical view was that our lives have two parts: our physical side (*nefesh*) and our harder-to-define, impossible-to-see nonphysical side (*levav*)” (122). So “soul” might be translated better as “body,” and “heart” as “mind,” or, as Hoffman quips, our “hardware” and “software” (122). I took “restores my soul” to be “heals my body” and then put it into a military context: “When I was injured, he held my head in his lap until the medics had patched me up.”

Psalm 23:3b: “He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.” Here I strayed further into artistic liberty, moving away from a psalm, song, or poem and toward storytelling (prose). In the confusion of battle, the right path is a matter of life and

death. “For his name’s sake,” “for the sake of his name,” a name of honor, a name to be proud to be associated with: “I’d follow him anywhere and am proud to be counted among his men.”

Psalm 23:4: “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.” Following the shepherd-leader-hero isn’t always about green grass and babbling brooks. Sometimes we end up in a mess. Imagine being a scared-to-death young corporal in the mayhem of your first deployment, bullets flying, your ears ringing, the smell of fear, yet knowing you’ve got a battle-hardened sergeant in charge. Your life is in his hands. His “rod and staff,” the tools of the trade, help you to relax and go about your business. His tools: a soldier’s rifle and a hand-grenade? Perhaps, but experience is a soldier’s best tool: “Even when everything seems to go wrong, I trust you. Just having you nearby—your keen eye and battle-hardened experience—helps me to stay focused.”

Psalm 23:5: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” Imagine being able to sit down and relax—and eat!—in the middle of enemies. Keeping the familiarity of the beginning of the line, “You prepare,” I turned “table” into the military term, “perimeter,” a zone of safety. But it gets better. Blessings abound, personal blessings, from leader to follower. What matters more to a person in a life-or-death situation, in battle? Who is on his or her mind? Loved ones, family—and what an unexpected, overflowing blessing when the leader, who should be busy with so many worries and responsibilities, takes the time to sit down with you and ask about your loved ones:

“You prepare a perimeter that no enemy could breach and then come to talk to me about my family.”

Psalm 23:6: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.” The way I see it, life isn’t a bed of roses, with goodness and mercy (or kindness) dancing around us 24/7; nevertheless, good and kind people and (possible, hopeful) circumstances and the awesome beauty of creation are never far away, following us, shadowing us, lurking in the shadows—for those with eyes to see. You don’t have to live in someone’s house to be in that person’s presence; the power of memory, imagination, allows us to carry him or her with us (forever, if we so desire): “He has helped me to see that life is still filled with good and kind people. I will never forget him.”

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