Digging in the Garden of Eden

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Abstract
The paper first presents the translation of Hebrew Genesis entitled At the Start... Genesis Made New. The new version belongs to the field of ethno-poetics. It intends to take today’s listener-reader back in time by capturing the characteristics of the original Hebrew and expressing them through the medium of modern English. If translations may be said to reflect archaeological layers of social history, At the Start... Genesis Made New attempts to dig down with the purpose of reaching the deepest layer: critical analysis of terminology in the Garden of Eden story provides insights into the primitive Hebrew society that invented this particular myth more than 3,000 years ago. The paper also looks at the same story as translated in the Revised Standard Version, first published as the Authorised Version or King James Bible in 1661, and The New English Bible, published in 1961. Different world views characteristic of European society in recent centuries colours the understanding of the biblical text. The translations are affected in consequence. A comparison between the versions is revealing...

Keywords
YHWH Elohim, man/woman, ground/groundling

This paper hinges on the first book of the Bible, commonly known as Genesis, and more particularly on chapters 2 and 3, which tell a mythical story about the first man and woman and how they are expelled from the Garden of Eden. It is argued here that the myths that emerge from societies are mirror images of the societies that invent them. Translations on the other hand, whilst seeking to reflect an original text, address the societies for which they are written. Consequently, the translations of an ancient text such as Genesis are like so many archaeological layers of social history: they reflect the issues and attitudes of subsequent cultures. The original text and the primitive society that produced it are buried somewhere beneath. In the author’s own version of Genesis, At the Start... Genesis Made New (Ats) (Korsak 1992; 1993), she has tried to dig down to the deepest archaeological layer and through the medium of translation to make the Hebrew text with its difference and distance come alive for the non-Hebrew reader. We shall look at how this is attempted and venture the question: What, if anything, does Ats reveal about primitive Hebrew society?

To illustrate the above, three versions ¹ of Genesis are introduced. First, Ats is presented. As suggested above, the new version intends to take today’s listener-reader back in time by capturing the characteristics of the original Hebrew and expressing them through the medium of correct, modern, but not necessarily current English. Second, by way of contrast, Revised Standard Version (RSV) is quoted. This translation was first published as Authorised Version or King James Bible in 1661. In its much revised form, it still remains today the best-loved version of English-speaking peoples. Third, in contrast again, reference is made to The New English Bible (NEB), written in current English. The Old Testament books of the NEB were first published in 1970.

Before proceeding further, a few words introduce the book of Genesis. It is a patchwork of different traditions approximately dating back to the period, 1200 to 500 BCE. The theme of the book is birth: the Greek word genesis means “beginning”, “origin”, and “descent”. Effectively, the book begins with the origins of the world: earth and skies are said to be “born”. The Hebrew word, toledot, meaning “birthings”, first used for the generation of earth and skies, is subsequently repeated to introduce successive generations of humankind. The word toledot, “birthings” thus comes to mean “history”. From Adam to Noah and Noah’s sons, through the cycles of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the patriarchs are “born” and “give birth”. The book ends with the Joseph story, which points to the “birth” of a people of Jacob’s stock.

Some of these concepts are strange, others have the appeal of the familiar. The birth metaphor applied to created things is a surprising but refreshing alternative to the contemporary, scientific (but none the less mythical?) “big bang”. The use of one word toledot, “birthings”, for the creation of the universe and for human generations suggests that the two are

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linked, that life moves on from creation to history, and that life is going somewhere. Through the transmission of Jewish and Christian teaching, it is suggested here that this view is largely responsible for the concept of progress that pervades Western culture. The story of Joseph situates the birth theme on a political plane: here the Deity, who guides the course of history, is represented watching over the destiny of the Hebrews, his chosen people.

Turning from these generalities to the translation *Ats*, what is new here? *Ats* applies the principles of the German translators Buber and Rosenzweig, who began working on their version of the *Bible* in the 1930s (Buber and Rosenzweig 1930).

One, this means going back to the Hebrew text and rejecting influences that stem directly from translations such as the Greek *Septuagint*, the Latin *Vulgate*, or earlier “consecrated” English versions. Two, the translator is respectful of form as well as content. For instance, the vocabulary of the source language is systematically reflected in the target language. To achieve this, each Hebrew word is carefully studied in all its contexts and the translator searches for an English word to correspond to it. As a result, when a word is repeated in the source text, the corresponding word is repeated in the translated text. The lexicographical research involved requires days, even years. Books, including lexicon, concordance, dictionary, and thesaurus, are essential but they do not provide all the answers. The author has carried words in her head and heart, hopefully waiting for a suitable English equivalent of a particularly difficult Hebrew word to surface. When pursued with care, this contextual method lends itself well to the translation of a poetic text such as *Genesis*.

Why this particular attention to form? Some observations about biblical Hebrew help answer this question. Unlike a modern language, Hebrew is close to its roots. The tri-consonantal root can be discerned in every Hebrew word. Paronyms (etymologically related words) are current and so is assonance. Furthermore, the biblical story-teller delights in word play, and repetitions. They serve as a mnemonic: for centuries the *Bible* has been learned by heart, recited, and listened to. They also provide significant clues for understanding the biblical message. These linguistic characteristics are reflected in the translation: Hebrew paronyms, assonance, and wordplay are echoed by English paronyms, assonance, and wordplay. In this way, word patterns from the source text emerge in the target text. They have only too often been effaced in the translation process. The experience of the translator who sets out to recover these patterns can be compared to that of an archaeologist unearthing and fitting together pieces from the past.

This theoretical explanation is now illustrated by examples. For practical purposes, examples are limited to two main characters in the Garden of Eden story: the human being and the Deity. A first word pattern introduces the human being. It is formed by the Hebrew paronyms *adam* and *adama*. In *Ats*, the paronyms *adam* and *adama* are translated as “groundling” and “ground”: the paronymous link is thus maintained. This solution comes as a surprise to the listener/reader but its unfamiliarity signals that something is to be learned here. Here are the opening verses of the Garden of Eden story with the repetition of the words “groundling” and “ground” from *Ats* 2, 4-9:

*On the day* YHWH Elohim made earth and skies
no shrub of the field was yet in the earth
for YHWH Elohim had not made it rain on the earth
and there was no *groundling* (adam) to serve the *ground* (adama)

But a surge went up from the earth
and gave drink to all the face of the *ground* (adama)

YHWH Elohim formed the *groundling* (adam), soil of the *ground* (adama)

He blew into its nostrils the blast of life
and the *groundling* (adam) became a living soul

YHWH Elohim planted a garden in Eden in the east
There he set the *groundling* (adam) he had formed

YHWH Elohim made sprout from the *ground* (adama)
all trees attractive to see and good for eating
the tree of life in the middle of the garden
and the tree of the knowing of good and bad (*Ats* 2, 4b-9)

The text presents the human being as a ground-related being. The term *adam*, “groundling”, occurs 24 times in the Garden of Eden story, *adama*, “ground”, eight times. Furthermore, the relationship of “groundling” and “ground” is explicated; the above quotation reveals that “the *groundling*” is “to serve the *ground*” (2, 5) and that “the *groundling*” is formed from “the soil of the *ground*” (2, 7). These statements at the beginning of the story are balanced by similar statements at the end of the story: in verse 3, 19, “the *groundling*” is told that it will “return to the *ground*”; in verse 3, 23, it is expelled from the garden “to serve the *ground* from which it was taken”. In summary, the word pattern observed here underscores the biblical vision of two human realities. One, human life is said to follow a cyclic pattern: the *groundling* comes from the *ground* and will return to it. Two, the *grounding*’s vocation to serve the *ground* is established from the outset, before the garden is planted in Eden. The word pattern signals that caring for the *ground* (independently of any toil that may or may not be attached to it), is part of the *groundling*’s destiny.

Is it possible to dig deeper, to discern anything
older below the cultural level presented? The author looks at the two words adam and adama as she would at two pieces of unearthed pottery and observes that adam is a masculine noun while adama is feminine. At a more basic level, the words suggest that new life is drawn from feminine matter, just as the young of animals and humans emerge from the female body.

Possible significance of the word pattern, grounding/ground, has been illustrated. Another pair of words is now presented: ish/isha, “man/woman”. These two words are linked by assonance. The word, ish, “man”, occurs three times in the story, the word isha, “woman”, 17 times. The word isha, “woman”, appears in the text before the word ish, “man”. The words isha, “woman” and ish, “man” occur for the first time in verses 2, 21-23 (to help clarify, adam and ish/isha are added in brackets).

YHWH Elohim made a swoon fall upon the groundling (adam)
  it slept
  He took one of its sides
  and closed up the flesh in its place
  YHWH Elohim built the side
  he had taken from the groundling (adam) into woman (ish)

He brought her to the groundling (adam)
The groundling (adam) said
  This one this time
  is bone from my bones
  flesh from my flesh
  This one shall be called wo-man (isha)
  for from man (ish)
  she has been taken this one (Ats 2, 21-23)

In the Hebrew text, the common syllable ish in isha and ish points to that which is shared by the couple. The odd syllable in isha, expresses their difference. The contemporary English mind is perhaps not as sensitive to this kind of wordplay as the Hebrew mind. Nevertheless, thanks to a fluke, English reflects these nuances perfectly: “woman” and “man” share a common syllable and “woman” has an extra syllable. To draw attention to these subtleties, in Ats, a hyphen is inserted in the word “wo-man”.

In summary, the two word patterns described underscore two human relationships: on the one hand, the interdependence of the human being and the ground and, on the other, the similarity and difference that characterize the human couple.

It is important to notice that ha-adam, “the grounding” is a generic term. Several reasons are advanced to support this statement. One, ha-adam is presented as both male and female in verse 27 of the preceding chapter, chapter 1:

Elohim created the groundling (ha-adam) in his image
  created it in the image of Elohim
  male and female created them (Ats 1, 27)

Two, the Garden of Eden story tells that the one, ha-adam, falls asleep and wakes up as two, isha and ish, “woman” and “man”. Subsequently in this story, ha-adam refers to the human couple. For example, when ha-adam is cast out of the garden (Ats 3, 24), it is clear that man and woman are expelled together. This last observation must be modified, however. In some cases, ha-adam refers to the man only but then the presence of woman is always signalled: the two continue to share their “groundling” nature. The third reason is grammatical: the presence of the definite article ha, “the”, before the term adam, indicates the presence of a common noun. The definite article is present in the Garden of Eden story up to verse 3, 17. In 3, 17, the article is dropped and Elohim addresses the man by his proper name, “Adam”.

The RSV and the NEB readings contrast with the above analysis. In both versions, adam is translated as “man”, adama a s “ground”: the paronymous link, adam/adama, is lost here. Furthermore, two Hebrew words, adam and ish, are translated by one English word, “man”. As a result, the term “man” appears 22 times in the RSV, 20 times in the NEB (3 times in Ats). In the RSV and the NEB, the word “man” appears in the text before the word “woman”. Comment on the significance of this is made below. Here are verses 2, 21-23 from the RSV:

So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man (adam), and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man (adam) he made into a woman (isha) and brought her to the man (adam). Then the man (adam) said,
  “This at last is bone of my bones
  and flesh of my flesh
  she shall be called Woman (isha)
  because she was taken out of Man (ish)” (RSV 2, 21-23)

Turning now from the human being to the Deity, two divine names have already appeared in quotation from Ats. They are YHWH and Elohim. YHWH transliterates the four Hebrew consonants, yod he vav he, known as the tetragrammaton. These consonants share a common root with the Hebrew verb “to be”. The key to the pronunciation of the tetragrammaton is lost. When the Hebrew text is read aloud, Jewish tradition proposes different solutions. The reader may
check beforehand to see where the tetragrammaton appears, preparing to pause for a second and observe a respectful silence. Or the tetragrammaton is read as though it were written Adonai, “My Lord(s)” (the name Jehovah is a hybrid composition which combines the consonants of the tetragrammaton with the vowels of Adonai). Or again it is read as ha-Shem, meaning “the Name”. Whichever solution is adopted, the personal name of God is taboo, and is veiled in mystery. The transliteration YHWH in *Ats* intends to reflect Hebrew-Jewish usage.

The name Elohim is the plural form of Eloah, which is related to Arabic *Allah*. The ending *im* is a masculine plural ending. Elohim shares a common root with the verb, “worship”. The Hebrew name Elohim, usually translated as “God” (*RSV* and *NEB*), is maintained as such in *Ats*. This choice respectfully acknowledges the Hebrew source and preserves local colour (cf. the use of Allah in English versions of the *Koran*). The maintaining of the names YHWH and Elohim in the English text is part of the digging down process described earlier. Let us dig a little further…

The plural aspect of Elohim has been noted. And the accompanying verb? It is usually singular, as seen in the quotations. Nonetheless, a sense of plurality again appears in the following verse where YHWH Elohim refers to himself as “us”:

> Here, the groundling has become as one of us (*Ats* 3, 22)

Commentators explain this usage by interpreting “us” as a plural of majesty but grammatical analysis does not bear this out. Effectively, Elohim’s plural aspect, expressed here in the pronoun “us”, is strikingly rendered in three other verses of *Genesis* (20, 13; 31, 53; and 35, 7) where the name Elohim is followed by a verb in the third person plural. It is difficult to harmonize this plural aspect with the ancient monotheistic belief that images the God of the Hebrews as a singular being. Does this suggest that the name Elohim is reminiscent of a time that is older than monotheism?

Two further observations are now made about the Deity. First, in the Garden of Eden story, divine actions are portrayed in anthropomorphic terms. YHWH Elohim plants a garden, forms the groundling from the soil of the ground, talks with it, forms the animals as potential companions, builds the woman from the groundling’s side, walks in the garden, professes ignorance of what goes on in his absence, and sanctions transgression. The analytical, often literal, contemporary mind is led to ask: Is this true? Some readers opt for a literal interpretation. Others understand that the language of myth addresses the non-literal: the sociological, the psychological, and the spiritual.

Another aspect of the Deity concerns the connection between YHWH Elohim and what is bad. YHWH Elohim is said to know good and bad (the author’s emphasis). This is illustrated three times in the story. Verse 2, 9 tells that YHWH Elohim plants the tree of the knowing of good and bad:

> YHWH Elohim made sprout from the ground all trees attractive to see and good for eating the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowing of good and bad (*Ats* 2, 9)

In verse 3, 5, the serpent tells the woman:

> you will be as Elohim knowing good and bad (*Ats* 3, 5)

The serpent’s words are confirmed by YHWH Elohim, when he says in verse 3, 22:

> Here, the groundling has become as one of us knowing good and bad (*Ats* 3, 22)

The Hebrew text raises an interesting question here: what kind of Deity is this who is responsible for introducing the knowing of good and bad into the world (the planting of the tree) and who has as a special divine attributed the knowing of good and bad (the words of the serpent and YHWH Elohim)? Again we seem to touch on something more ancient, more primitive than a wholly good image of God. The question is left open.

Where the Hebrew text states clearly that Elohim knows good and bad, the *NEB* mitigates the impact of the God/bad connection, by translating Elohim as “gods knowing both good and evil” (3, 5) (the author’s emphasis). The plural form and small letter effects a shift to the moral plane. Further comment on this is made below.

We have looked at certain aspects of the human being and the Deity in the Garden of Eden story. Questions are now asked about the society which invented this myth. In this respect, the so-called “curses” are revealing. They mark the turning-point at which the human couple leaves the symbolic world of the Garden for the world of everyday reality. The “curses” provide clues about the social position of woman and man in the real world. In the Hebrew text, YHWH Elohim tells the woman that she will give birth at the cost of labour, that sexual desire will attach her to her partner, and that her desire will be subject to his control. Birth, sexual desire, the control of her sexual behaviour: her place in society is bound to her life-producing capacity. Here is verse 3, 16
Life-sustaining food. Life and death. This society is concerned with survival! A hypothesis is now proposed to explain how the story arose. The members of an agricultural society turn from the cares of child-raising and the daily grind in the fields to seek a pattern and meaning for their life experience. They ask themselves: Where does life come from? How has the world come to be: the trees and the animals and ourselves? Why this mixed experience of good and bad in our lives? Where are we going? The answers to these eternal conundrums are inaccessible and their mystery is expressed here in the symbolic language of myth. The story springs from a human situation. It assigns causes to that situation and in this sense is an aetiological story. Furthermore, the story establishes set patterns: it defines and stabilizes a series of relationships, that of the human being and the earth, of man and woman, and of the human being and the Deity.

The first and major part of this paper has presented two pairs of Hebrew words, adam/adama and ish/ishaa and examined their implications for understanding the Hebrew image of the human being. It has looked at two divine names, YHWH and Elohim, and used these as a starting point for observations about the Hebrew image of the Deity. Furthermore, it has proposed a hypothesis about the origins of the Garden of Eden story. It has also noted the reciprocal influence of society on text and text on society. A vast leap is now made into the twentieth century. To facilitate comparison, here also commentary is limited to conceptions of the human being and the Deity.

The Oxford Annotated Bible, which is a 1962 edition of the RSV, is accompanied by footnotes to guide the reader’s understanding. These footnotes reveal a different world view whose beginnings can be traced back to the puritanical, patriarchal period that saw the first heroic translations of the Bible in the vernacular (one remembers with respect men such as Tyndale, an outstanding English scholar, who translated the Bible and diffused his work at the cost of his life. He was executed in 1536). In The Oxford Annotated Bible, the Garden of Eden story is given a title: “The creation and the fall of man”. A series of footnotes is selected here in the RSV order of presentation.

Man is …dust animated by the Lord God’s breath or spirit. The prohibition against eating the forbidden fruit (3, 3) stresses God’s lordship and man’s obedience. The deep affinity between man and woman is portrayed in the statement that God made the woman from man’s rib (24-25). Sex is not regarded as evil but as a God-given impulse which draws man and woman together so that they become one flesh. The temptation begins with the insinuation of doubt.
in pain you shall bring forth children
yet your desire shall be for your husband
and he shall rule over you (RSV 3, 16)

According to the RSV, she knows “pain”, where Adam is subject to “toil”, though the Hebrew word translated as “pain” and “toil” is the same in both cases. The NEB proposes a more exact translation when it repeats the word “labour”: she labours in childbirth; he/she labour in the field. Nonetheless, the NEB is harsh on the woman:

I will increase your labour and you groaning
And in labour you shall bear children
You shall be eager for your husband
and he shall be your master (NEB 3, 16)

To further remark, the NEB first came out at the end of the nineteen sixties. Yet another world view, affected by the competitive spirit of the times, colours the translation. Note that the “master”; just quoted, is given a further boost when the words “win” and “gain” translate the Hebrew verb for “eat” in verses 3, 17 and 19:

With labour you shall win your food from it (NEB 3, 17).
You shall gain your bread by the sweat of your brow (NEB 3, 19) (the author’s emphasis)

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, this brief analysis has introduced Genesis as a book about life and birth. It has emphasized the close links between Hebrew language and Hebrew concepts, illustrating this by showing how the word patterns “grounding/ground” and “man/woman” underscore Hebrew understanding of human roles and relationships. It has looked at Hebrew names for God, pointing out the inscrutable nature of the tetragrammaton and, by adopting a both/and rather than an either/or approach, it has drawn attention to ancient concepts of the Deity: Elohim has both singular and plural aspects; Elohim knows both good and bad. After proposing a hypothesis about the society that invented the Garden of Eden story, it has suggested that subsequent world views revise the myth and that translations are affected in consequence.

The reference to different world views is not meant to be judgmental. One view may be as valid as another. Among competing realities, none is necessarily better. People take and make their own world views. Does this mean there is no more sacred? Translators, dig away! These tasks, creative retranslation and interpretation, maybe touch upon the
sacred. They link up with the ongoing process of life.

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