

Masoretic or Mixed: On Choosing a Textual Basis for a Translation of the Hebrew Bible

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During the last quarter of last century a new official Swedish translation of the Hebrew Bible was worked out. We started in 1975 and finished in the year 2000, and the complete edition of the three parts of the whole Bible, the Old Testament, the Deuterocanonical Books and the New Testament, were ceremonially presented to the Minister of Culture in February 2001.

Before the work began, a state committee had sat from 1971 to 1974 to draw up the guiding principles for the translation.¹ One of the central problems which we had to discuss was the question of the textual basis for this new Swedish version. There had been only two previous official and authorized translations in our country. The first, from 1541, was in all essentials a Swedish version of Luther's German Bible. The second translation, on which a Royal Commission had been labouring since 1773, was at last—after 144 years of diligent work—published in 1917. In contrast to the old version, this Swedish Bible was based on a careful study of the Hebrew and Greek originals. But whereas in the New Testament the translators were anxious to include the results of contemporary text-critical studies, in the Old Testament they decided to follow faithfully the Masoretic text practically without any textual criticism at all.²

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¹ Published as *Att översätta Gamla testamentet: Texter, kommentarer, riktlinjer* (Statens offentliga utredningar 1974:33, Stockholm: Allmänna Förlaget, 1974).

² See *Att översätta*, 40–52.

Thus the first Swedish Bible had in all essentials followed a German original, and the second had rather slavishly kept to the Masoretic text. We decided that the time had at last come to allow the results of modern textual studies of the Hebrew original to influence the new version. This was not, of course, at all innovative: we were following in the footsteps of other modern Western translations of the Bible: the Revised Standard Version, the New English Bible, the New American Bible, the French Jerusalem Bible, and several others.

So the text-critical principles of the new Swedish translation of the Hebrew Bible are neither new nor uncommon. The reason why I want to discuss these principles is the fact that they have recently been challenged, not by some crackpot with a mania for originality but by one of the foremost experts on the textual history and the textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible. A few years ago Professor Emanuel Tov read a paper at the Triennial Translators' Workshop of the United Bible Societies in Mexico, and it was published in the year 2000 in vol. 20 of *Textus*. Its title is "The Textual Basis of Modern Translations of the Hebrew Bible: the Argument against Eclecticism."³ When a distinguished scholar like Emanuel Tov suggests—and I quote his own words—"returning to the principles of the first biblical translations that were based on MT, such as the KJV,"⁴ then I think we should either take up the gauntlet and scrutinize his argument or else follow his advice and abandon our eclectic principles. I for one have not been convinced by Tov's plea for a return to a pre-critical approach, and I shall try to explain why. Let me emphasize that my scepticism does not imply any lack of respect for Professor Tov's scholarly standing: it is precisely because he is rightly regarded as an eminent authority in textual matters that his arguments must be taken seriously.

Tov begins his paper with a distinction between two different types of translations of the Hebrew Bible: "scholarly translations included in critical commentaries, and translations prepared for believing communities,

³ E. Tov, "Textual Basis of Modern Translations," *Textus* 20 (2000) 193–211.

⁴ Tov, "Textual Basis of Modern Translations," 209.

Christian and Jewish.”⁵ These two kinds were originally distinct, but they have grown more and more similar: “In recent decades,” says Tov, “the two types of translation have become almost indistinguishable and often share the same principles.”⁶ Just like scholarly translations found in critical commentaries, modern versions intended for believing communities and the general public include readings from the Dead Sea scrolls or from the Septuagint and other ancient translations. “It is more or less axiomatic for modern translation enterprises that the translation should be eclectic, that is, that MT should be followed in principle, but occasionally ought to be abandoned.”⁷

Having quoted or summarized descriptions of these eclectic principles in a number of modern versions of the Bible, Tov arrives at his main point: “In spite of the obvious advantages of a critical procedure in the creation of translations, this approach is problematical.” And he continues: “The main problem is the eclecticism itself, which some people regard as arrogance and which involves the subjective selection of readings found in the ancient translations and the Qumran manuscripts.”⁸

A key term here is the phrase “subjective selection of readings.” It is evident that for Tov the main drawback of the eclectic method is the subjectivity involved in the choice of readings. The words “subjective” and “subjectivity” time and again recur in his argument, and it seems appropriate to take a closer look at his use of this term.

The term occurs in fact frequently also in Tov’s well-known books *The Text-critical Use of the Septuagint in Biblical Research*⁹ and *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*.¹⁰ In the first of these instructive volumes we read, for instance, that “Obviously it is a very subjective and difficult matter to

⁵ Tov, “Textual Basis of Modern Translations,” 193.

⁶ Tov, “Textual Basis of Modern Translations,” 195.

⁷ Tov, “Textual Basis of Modern Translations,” 198–199.

⁸ Tov, “Textual Basis of Modern Translations,” 202.

⁹ Second Edition, Revised and Enlarged (Jerusalem: Simor, 1997).

¹⁰ Second Revised Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).

earmark a certain variant as original, and the reading of MT as an error"¹¹ or that "It goes without saying that all evaluations of readings are subjective."¹² In his *Textual Criticism*, Tov adduces a number of examples of corruptions in the biblical text, based on the comparison of MT and other witnesses, and he writes: "Such a comparison is based on objective textual data and recognized scribal phenomena. However, the final decision, at the level of the evaluation of these readings is necessarily subjective."¹³

When Tov rejects an eclectic textual basis for a translation of the Hebrew Bible on the ground that it is subjective, what exactly does he mean by "subjective"? Unfortunately he never makes quite clear in what sense he is using the terms "subjective" and "objective." He simply talks about subjectivity and objectivity as if it were self-evident what these words stand for. Obviously this is not so: they are notoriously difficult to define exactly and may be used with several different shades of meaning.

If we turn to the definitions of "subjective" in volume 17 of the *Oxford English Dictionary*,¹⁴ some of these are obviously inappropriate when applied to Tov's text. "Due to internal causes and discoverable by oneself alone" is clearly not what Tov means, nor is "Existing in the mind only, without anything real to correspond to it; illusory, fanciful." We are getting closer with "Relating to the thinking subject, proceeding from or taking place within the subject; having its source in the mind," and in some cases at least this seems to be what Tov means, especially when he contrasts objective textual data and subjective evaluation of these data. But what Tov has in mind is perhaps sometimes better specified by another definition in the dictionary: "Pertaining or peculiar to an individual subject or his mental operations; depending upon one's individuality or idiosyncrasy; personal, individual." For Tov "objective" means, it seems, something like "existing in the external world, independently of the thoughts and feelings of the observer," whereas "subjective" seems to carry either a more descriptive

¹¹ Tov, *The Text-critical Use*, 194.

¹² Tov, *The Text-critical Use*, 217.

¹³ Tov, *Textual Criticism*, 10.

¹⁴ Second edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

meaning, “existing only in the mind of a human being,” or a slightly pejorative sense, “influenced by the individual scholar’s personal opinions and ideas.” I do not think, however, that it is always possible to distinguish clearly between these two nuances, and in many of Tov’s statements they seem to merge.

The purely descriptive sense states the rather obvious fact that comparisons and evaluations of variant readings are made by human brains and are therefore never independent of scholarly judgement, unlike the variant readings themselves, which clearly exist independently of the human mind, in the sense that any literate person can verify their factuality just by checking a manuscript or an edition. This is simply another way of stating the distinction between facts and observations on the one hand and conclusions and arguments on the other. To point out the subjectivity of textual judgements in this descriptive sense seems not very helpful: it is a characteristic which is necessarily shared by all judgements made in the humanities, by philologists, historians, literary scholars, and all the rest.

But the word “subjective” as used by Tov is sometimes not strictly descriptive: it also has a pejorative shade of meaning, suggesting a lack of objectivity that is regarded as in itself a deficiency. Clearly “objectivity” for Tov is a good thing, and “subjectivity” a dubious quality that renders the eclectic method questionable and suspicious. And so “subjective” is used almost as an equivalent to “biased” or “arbitrary.” Now this seems to me a rather simplistic view, too black and white, as if there were no degrees of subjectivity, no ways of deciding between loose speculations and reliable conclusions.

When arguing against the eclecticism of modern translations of the Hebrew Bible, Tov makes the somewhat exaggerated claim that in the evaluation of textual readings “subjectivity is so pervasive that well-based solutions seem to be impossible.”¹⁵ But as a learned and astute critic, he is of course aware that all textual arguments are not equally uncertain, and in his purely text-critical works he is sometimes more balanced and realistic.

¹⁵ Tov, “Textual Basis of Modern Translations,” 203.

Discussing reconstructions of the hypothetical *Vorlage* of the Septuagint, for instance, he writes about “reliable Greek-Hebrew equivalents” and “satisfactory retroversions.”¹⁶ And he allows for variants from the ancient versions if they have “been obtained by reliable methods of reconstruction.”¹⁷ Likewise Tov does not hesitate to make statements like the following: “Both the Hebrew parent text of the Septuagint [...] and certain of the Qumran texts [...] reflect excellent texts, often better than that of MT.”¹⁸ Evidently “well-based solutions” are not always “impossible.”

It seems to me that this less rigid and more balanced view, which is represented in many passages in Tov’s works, invalidates or at least undermines his sweeping use of the term “subjective” in his attack on eclecticism. All research in the humanities requires judgements and choices between alternative solutions, and it is certainly possible to distinguish between judgements for which there are conclusive or at least creditable arguments, based on solid evidence on the one hand, and judgements which can be shown to be based on misconceptions, defective logic or a misleading selection of facts on the other hand.¹⁹

The difficulty, of course, is that there is no clear or absolute line of demarcation between good and bad arguments. Arguments can be arranged along a scale reaching from the completely convincing to the barely credible, and it is in many cases possible for serious scholars to disagree about the precise place on this scale of a particular argument. This uncertainty, this subjectivity, is what Tov wants to avoid at all costs. As there is no unfailing and completely objective method to sort out the most original reading, he thinks that Bible translators should dispense with textual decisions altogether. His solution is not to untie but to cut the

¹⁶ Tov, *The Text-critical Use*, 72.

¹⁷ Tov, *Textual Criticism*, 298.

¹⁸ Tov, *Textual Criticism*, 24.

¹⁹ See e.g. the useful discussion in G. Hermerén, “Criteria of Objectivity in History,” *Danish Year book of Philosophy* 14 (1977) 13–40.

Gordian knot: we should “use a single source as the basis for a translation,”²⁰ and “If MT is chosen [...], it should be followed consistently.”²¹

That this is only apparently a valid solution is evident already from Tov’s use of the word “chosen,” which reveals that the necessity of a subjective choice has not been escaped. True, the choice has been made on a different level, but it is not therefore less subjective. And one could also say that in all the passages where we have a textual problem the choice between variants has not really been abolished by Tov, only predetermined: the question has in each single case been settled in advance in favour of the reading found in MT.

It is tempting to quote here what Tov has written elsewhere about MT: that “we would still have to decide *which* Masoretic Text [...], since the Masoretic Text is not a uniform textual unit, but is itself represented by many witnesses.”²² These inner-masoretic variations are of course much more limited than differences between MT and other witnesses, but (to quote an observation which Tov has made in a similar context) “this is merely a matter of quantity, not of principle.”²³

I should perhaps add that I do not for a moment question the standing of MT as the essential basis for a translation of the OT: it is, after all, the only complete version of the Hebrew original that is available, and so is simply our necessary point of departure. What I object to is Tov’s claim that this traditional text should be preserved in every detail and must never be corrected.

According to Tov, modern scholarly translations “claim to reflect the *Urtext* of the biblical books.”²⁴ I doubt that all scholars would uphold such

²⁰ Tov, “Textual Basis of Modern Translations,” 203.

²¹ Tov, “Textual Basis of Modern Translations,” 209. Tov allows for the possibility that some other source could be chosen, e.g. the Septuagint.

²² Tov, *Textual Criticism*, 11. See also a similar statement in Tov’s article “The Status of the Masoretic Text in Modern Text Editions of the Hebrew Bible: The Relevance of Canon,” in *The Canon Debate* (ed. L.M. McDonald and J.A. Sanders; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002) 242.

²³ Tov, “Textual Basis of Modern Translations,” 202.

²⁴ Tov, “Textual Basis of Modern Translations,” 193.

far-reaching pretensions. The original form of the text has become an increasingly elusive goal, and even if “it is likely that there has been an original text in the sense of the first (complete) edition” (as Arie van der Kooij has put it),²⁵ I would prefer a more cautious way of expressing our aim. A.E. Housman once gave a simple and ingenious definition of textual criticism as “the science of discovering error in texts and the art of removing it.”²⁶ This definition may well be applied to the task of Bible translators: we should simply try to correct MT where scribal mistakes have been discovered and can be removed.

In a section called “The Need for the Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible,” Tov has rightly stressed that “a serious involvement in biblical studies clearly necessitates the study of all sources, including the differences between them.”²⁷ But why should the results of such studies be kept within the narrow circle of biblical scholars and not be allowed to influence translations made for the general reader? It seems odd that the very legitimacy of textual decisions should be questioned, and, as we heard, Tov even intimates that eclecticism might be regarded as arrogance.

A further objection immediately suggests itself: What does it mean to follow MT *consistently*? Is it really possible to do so everywhere? We all know that MT is in some passages corrupt and in fact incomprehensible. Tov is naturally well aware of this difficulty: “Obviously there are many problems in producing a translation that follows MT only, and at times unconventional solutions will have to be found to include in modern

²⁵ A. van der Kooij, “The Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible Before and After the Qumran Discoveries,” in *The Bible as Book: The Hebrew Bible and the Judaean Desert Discoveries* (ed. E.D. Herbert and E. Tov; London: British Library, 2002) 174. Cf. also K. Hognesius, *The Text of 2 Chronicles 1–16: A Critical Edition with Textual Commentary* (Coniectanea Biblica. Old Testament Series 51; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2003) 20–27.

²⁶ A.E. Housman, “The Application of Thought to Textual Criticism,” in *Selected Prose* (ed. J. Carter; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961) 131. Housman’s paper was first read to the Classical Association meeting at Cambridge in 1921 and published in its *Proceedings* 18 (1922) 67ff.

²⁷ Tov, *Textual Criticism*, 2.

translations details in the text that are unintelligible or even corrupt."²⁸ The expression "unconventional solutions" seems to be a euphemism here for something less honourable, in fact a way of misleading the ordinary reader. Even this is actually conceded by Tov. He first refers to an article by H.L. Ginsberg, telling "The Story of the Jewish Publication Society's New Translation of the Torah," a version which expressly claims to be a faithful rendering of MT. Ginsberg wrote: "where we have been convinced that the text is corrupt, we have made do with the received text if it was at all possible to squeeze out of it a meaning not too far removed from what we thought might have been the sense of the original reading."²⁹ Tov himself comments: "The procedure described is in a way unfair to the reader, for it implies that the translators maneuvered the English language in order to make some sense of a passage that, according to their scholarly opinion, did not make sense."³⁰ This, then, is what the method recommended by Tov is bound to entail, and it seems to me obvious that the manipulations involved in finding the "unconventional solutions" which Tov favours are no less subjective than arguments used in favour of a variant reading.

Tov's kind of solution is moreover deliberately chosen against one's better judgement and is based on a reading which is understood to be corrupt, whereas the choice of a variant according to the eclectic method is based on the best available evidence and leads to a result which is probably and in several cases almost certainly right.³¹ Tov's solution means, too, that the true nature of the problem is concealed: a difficulty which is essentially a textual problem is solved as if it were a problem of meaning and translation.

²⁸ Tov, "Textual Basis of Modern Translations," 209.

²⁹ Quoted from Tov, "Textual Basis of Modern Translations," 210, n. 45.

³⁰ Tov, "Textual Basis of Modern Translations," 210.

³¹ Cf. also a similar objection (against D. Barthélemy) in my "Translation and Emendation," in *Language, Theology, and The Bible: Essays in Honour of James Barr* (ed. S.E. Balentine and J. Barton; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) 39.

A moment ago I quoted Tov's candid statement that there are details in MT "that are unintelligible and even corrupt."³² Perhaps it could be added here that corrupt, untranslatable and unintelligible are not always the same thing. A word or a passage may be perfectly translatable and intelligible and nevertheless corrupt, or an expression may be translatable in itself but unintelligible in the context. Many combinations are possible, and, as always, all text-critical cases must be analysed and assessed individually.

So far I have only discussed Tov's recommendation as a question of principle, and it is time to look at a few concrete examples. Unfortunately Tov's own discussion in his article against eclecticism is entirely abstract: there is not a single example of the practical consequences of the method he advocates. That is a pity, for as the English saying goes, "the proof of the pudding is in the eating." Let us look at some passages and compare the results of the eclectic method and of Tov's proposal.

A well-known case of an unintelligible word in MT is found in Isa 14:4. It is the noun *מדהבה*, which is unexplained—there is no known Hebrew root *דהב*. The word occurs in the opening of the taunt-song over the king of Babylon: "How the oppressor has ceased, the *מדהבה* ceased!" It has long ago been suggested, with the support of several ancient versions, that we should read *מרהבה* "insolence"³³ instead of MT's unintelligible *מדהבה* (*daleth* and *resh* are of course easily and frequently confused), and this emendation has since been confirmed by the first Isaiah scroll from Qumran. The interesting thing is that the version issued by the Jewish Publication Society of America (NJV),³⁴ which is expressly a version "according to the Masoretic text"³⁵—Tov even claims that "it follows MT without exception"³⁶—here

³² Above, n. 27.

³³ So already J.D. Michaelis: see E.F.C. Rosenmüller, *Scholia in Vetus Testamentum* III:1 (Leipzig: Barth, 1791) 315 ("Michaelis, qui hanc lectionem vulgari praeferit").

³⁴ *The Torah* (1962), *The Prophets* (1978), *The Writings* (1982). These were brought together in a single volume (with revisions): *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

³⁵ So the first editions; the single volume has "According to the Traditional Hebrew Text."

chooses the Qumran variant, with the footnote “Reading *marhebah* with 1QIs^a (cf. Septuagint). The traditional reading *madhebah* is of unknown meaning.” If we agree with Karl Popper that one single observation of a black swan allows us to conclude that not all swans are white,³⁷ we may infer from this passage that MT has not been followed consistently even in NJV—indeed telling evidence of the impracticability of the method recommended by Tov.

A clear case of an unintelligible and corrupt passage in MT which is easily remedied with the aid of the ancient versions is found in Ps 49. The reading in MT is a common word, readily translated in isolation but unintelligible in the context. The psalmist speaks of the common fate of all men: the wise and the stupid alike must die. And in v. 12 he continues: קרבם בתימו לעולם “their midst is their home forever.” This is extremely obscure, but the Septuagint and other ancient versions provide the solution. They have a word for “grave,” and evidently two letters have been transposed: instead of the difficult קרבם they have read קברם, which gives excellent meaning and fits perfectly in the context: all men die, and “their grave is their home forever.” Very probably the masoretic reading is a simple clerical error—mistakes of this kind are easily made, and I suppose most of us have committed similar transpositions many times (I certainly have). There can hardly be any doubt that the reading of the ancient versions represents the original text.³⁸ And it is highly interesting to note that the NJV translates

³⁶ Tov, *Textual Criticism*, XXXV. Tov has, however, a more realistic formulation on p. 374: that it “reproduces MT as much as possible.”

³⁷ See e.g. B. Magee, *Popper* (Fontana Modern Masters, London: Fontana/Collins, 1973) 22.

³⁸ This is also the view of Abraham Geiger in his *Urschrift und Übersetzungen der Bibel in ihrer Abhängigkeit von der innern Entwicklung des Judentums* ([1857] 2nd ed; Frankfurt am Main: Mada, 1928) 176. Geiger does not, however, regard the masoretic reading as a clerical error but explains it as probably (*wohl*) an anti-Sadducean alteration made by the Pharisees, who considered it offensive that the dead should remain forever in the grave, as if there were no resurrection. And so the objectionable wording, attested by the ancient versions, was changed into the reading now found in MT. Geiger admits, however, that MT is rather unintelligible

“Their grave is their eternal home,” with a rather dishonest footnote: “Taken with ancient versions and medieval commentators as the equivalent of *qibram*”—as if the text-critical operation which is the only possible basis for the rendering “grave” could be rightfully represented as an interpretation of the traditional text.

In the first chapter of 1 Sam we hear about Hannah and Elkanah and how they go up to the temple at Shiloh. According to MT Hannah takes little Samuel up with her, along with three bulls, **בפרים שלשה** (v. 24). This seems a clear and intelligible reading. There are nevertheless good reasons to regard it as corrupt. In the next verse we are told that they slaughtered “the bull,” in the singular, and instead of the three bulls the Septuagint has “a three-year-old bull,” presupposing a Hebrew **בפר משלש**, a simple case of different word division. It has long been recognized that this must be the correct reading,³⁹ and **משלש** is now also attested by the first Samuel scroll from cave 4 in Qumran. Tov agrees that this is the original wording: he writes that “the common reading of the LXX and 4QSam^a in 1 Sam 1:24 [...] reflects the uncorrupted text, while MT has been corrupted.”⁴⁰ But if we follow his advice, we should nevertheless keep the three bulls and leave the reader with the problem of how this is to be reconciled with the singular in the next verse. No “unconventional solution” can of course mitigate the difficulty here: the meaning of the erroneous text is quite clear, and the translation “three bulls” cannot be avoided. Not all corruptions result in a text which is difficult to translate.

In another passage in 1 Sam there is a well-known case of accidental omission in MT. It is found in 14:41, where the eye of a scribe must have jumped from the first appearance of the word Israel to a later occurrence,

(*ziemlich unverständlich*). But the idea that a conscious correction should result in an incomprehensible text seems to me considerably less probable than the explanation as a simple error.

³⁹ Since L. Cappellus (Cappel) in the 17th cent.: see the survey of early studies of this passage in D. Barthélémy, *Critique textuelle de l'Ancien Testament* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 50/1, Fribourg: Éditions universitaires, 1982) 1:141–142.

⁴⁰ *The Text-critical Use*, 190.

omitting all the intervening words, with the consequence that the remaining text is hardly intelligible (though some defenders of the sanctity of MT have of course found it perfectly satisfactory—there is no conceivable scribal error which cannot with learning, ingenuity and wishful thinking be promoted to a linguistic nicety). The passage occurs in a context where Jonathan has unwittingly broken Saul’s ban on eating before evening, and Saul wants to find out who is guilty. According to MT v. 41 begins: “Saul said to the Lord, the God of Israel: הבה תמים Give *tamim*” (whatever that may mean; RV has “Shew the right”). The Septuagint and the Vulgate both have a much longer text which may be translated “Saul said to the Lord, the God of Israel: Why have you not answered your servant today? If this guilt lies in me or in my son Jonathan, Lord God of Israel, give *Urim*, and if it lies in your people Israel, give *Thummim*.” No doubt this is the original text, clear and intelligible, and MT is the difficult and disconnected result of an accidental omission.⁴¹ This is very clearly stated by Tov himself in his book on the text-critical use of the Septuagint: “There seems to be no way of explaining the biblical text except with the aid of the section which has been transmitted solely by the LXX (and V) [...]. This section must have been omitted accidentally.”⁴² It is difficult to see why this clarifying and salutary result of text-critical research should be denied to the general reader just for the pleasure of avoiding subjectivity.

In 2 Sam 18:2 according to MT we read: “And David sent out the people, one third under the command of Joab, one third under the command of Abishai the son of Zerua, Joab’s brother, and one third under the command of Ittai the Gittite.” But the following verses show that the army was not yet sent out: it is still there, and a conversation between king David and his men is reported; the troops do not march out until v. 4. Greek manuscripts of the Lucianic tradition, however, offer a variant to MT’s וישלח “sent out”: they have a word meaning “divided into three,” which is clearly based on

⁴¹ For a more detailed discussion of this passage see my “Some Observations on Two Oracular Passages in 1 Sam,” in *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute* 11 (1978) 5–10.

⁴² *The Text-critical Use*, 128–129.

a Hebrew variant וישלש instead of MT's וישלח. I do not think that there can be any serious doubt that this variant represents the original text, and it seems preferable to spare the reader the easily translatable but nevertheless corrupt reading of MT.

In Micah 5 Israelite leaders are promised victory against the Assyrians, and according to MT “they will shepherd the land of Assyria with the sword, and the land of Nimrod in its gates” (v. 5). The last word, בפתחיה, is difficult in this context; it is, as Delbert Hillers has noticed in his commentary, “unsatisfactory in sense and as a parallel to ‘sword’.”⁴³ Both problems are solved by a simple operation: if with a slight change we read בפתחה “with the drawn sword” instead of MT’s בפתחיה “in its gates” we get both a satisfactory sense and the expected parallelism: “the land of Assyria with the sword, and the land of Nimrod with the drawn blade.” The word, though uncommon, is found in this sense in Ps 55:22, and there is support for this reading in minor ancient versions. MT cannot be forced to mean what it ought to mean, and the remedy is not some kind of strained interpretation but an elementary text-critical operation.

I could go on quoting literally hundreds of such examples, but I think this is enough to show that the principles recommended by Tov sometimes lead to unfortunate results. To my mind this is too high a price to pay for the doubtful gain of avoiding subjectivity—especially as it does not really save us from this menace, but merely moves it to a different area.

It is interesting to note Tov’s sharp distinction between scholarly translations and those intended for the general public. He appears to regard the influence from the former as something deplorable: he talks of “the subjective eclecticism imported from the world of scholarship,”⁴⁴ and declares that such eclecticism “has entered the world of confessional translations through the back door, coming from the academic world.”⁴⁵ It seems a strange attitude: to want to protect ordinary Bible readers from the

⁴³ D.R. Hillers, *Micah: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Micah* (Hermeneia, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 68.

⁴⁴ Tov, “Textual Basis of Modern Translations,” 210.

⁴⁵ Tov, “Textual Basis of Modern Translations,” 211.

results of serious and sincere studies. I cannot help recalling a discussion in Sweden a century ago about precisely this problem. The leading members of the Royal Translation Commission defended their decision to keep to the MT even in obviously corrupt passages with exactly the same arguments as Tov: though textual studies have produced good results, all reconstructions are nevertheless uncertain and subjective; to stick to MT is the only principle which can be followed consistently, and in a version intended not for “more or less learned circles” but for the national church this is the only possible principle.⁴⁶ It is almost ghostlike to hear these arguments echoing once more in Tov’s plea, not least in his warnings for the influence of scholarly research. The Swedish Commission was criticized by an OT professor at Uppsala named Erik Stave.⁴⁷ He reacted against the wholesale characterization of textual criticism as subjective and arbitrary, and when the Commission’s fidelity to MT was defended with the argument that the translation was not meant for scholars but for ordinary people, he asked why the admittedly good results of scholarly research should be denied to the people. Stave also showed that the claim to have followed MT consistently was hollow—just as not even NJV has been able to live up to this principle, as we saw a moment ago, so he could demonstrate that the Commission had in fact deviated from MT in a number of passages.

Tov’s argument against eclecticism is characterized by a marked reluctance to make textual judgements and choices. The same attitude was expressed by the gentlemen of the old Swedish commission: a key argument is that once you start abandoning MT, there is no given boundary: “Where do you draw the line?” (as one of them wrote).⁴⁸ Tov does not phrase it exactly like that, but it is an important aspect of his aversion to eclecticism. It leads him into making statements like, “In due

⁴⁶ See *Att översätta Gamla testamentet* (above, n. 1) 41–47.

⁴⁷ *Att översätta*, 45–51. On Stave see R.G.S. Idestrom, *From Biblical Theology to Biblical Criticism: Old Testament Scholarship at Uppsala University, 1866–1922* (Coniectanea Biblica. Old Testament Series 47; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2000) 153–192.

⁴⁸ See *Att översätta*, 42 (J. Personne: “hvar går gränsen?”).

course reasoning along these lines could give rise to translations that are completely different from MT,"⁴⁹ which seems an absurd exaggeration.

The fact that there is no absolute boundary between necessary amendments and possible proposals of course constitutes a real problem, but it is not a problem which should be evaded the way Tov suggests—as we have seen this leads to other problems and other subjective choices. Tov himself has written some wise words about the difficulty of evaluating text-critical arguments; he says: "These difficulties, however, do not render the whole procedure of textual evaluation questionable, for such is the nature of the undertaking."⁵⁰ Indeed, such is the nature of the undertaking—and it is a pity that Tov is not prepared to extend this insight to biblical translation as well.

There is no god-given version of the text which can be followed everywhere, there are only imperfect manuscripts and versions, the products of fallible men, and as all these texts "differ from each other to a greater or lesser extent,"⁵¹ the translator cannot evade making a choice, trying to find out which of two or several readings is likely to be more original. Tov's wish to relieve the translator of this responsibility is difficult to understand. The real reason for this rather extreme view still eludes me. I find it strange to be so afraid of potential errors of subjective judgement as to deliberately prefer manifest errors of transcription. Tov's view reminds one of the futile attempts of fundamentalists to exalt the biblical words above all human shortcomings and rescue them from being evaluated and judged by sinful creatures. I have no reason to believe that Tov shares such ideas, but his recommendations come dangerously close to such an attitude. I prefer the view expressed by Eugene Ulrich, who wrote: "What we must strive for is the best that the human mind and human methods can produce within our particular culture and our own generation."⁵²

⁴⁹ Tov, "Textual Basis of Modern Translations," 211.

⁵⁰ Tov, *Textual Criticism*, 310.

⁵¹ Tov, *Textual Criticism*, 2.

⁵² E. Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Origins of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999) 50.

Instead of trying to escape the difficulties involved in textual judgements we should face them, realizing that the Bible is written and copied by human beings and that the uncertainty of textual judgements, of interpretation and of translation are inevitably part of its earthly conditions. Bible translators too must—to quote a phrase from Reynolds and Wilson’s fine book *Scribes and Scholars*—“accept the necessities of an imperfect world.”⁵³

⁵³ L.D. Reynolds and N.G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature* (3rd ed.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) 239.