

Hebrew has no Future Tense

The Hebrew language has the present and past tense but no future tense. In the Hebrew language, Joel 2:28-32 reads as follows:

(Young's Literal Translation of the Holy Bible with the correct tenses of the verbs)

"And it hath come to pass afterwards, I do pour out My spirit on all flesh, And prophesied have your sons and your daughters, Your old men do dream dreams, Your young men do see visions. And also on the men-servants, and on the maid-servants, In those days I do pour out My Spirit. And I have given wonders in the heavens, and in the earth, Blood and fire, and columns of smoke. The sun is turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, Before the coming of the day of Jehovah, The great and the fearful. And it hath come to pass, Every one who calleth in the name of Jehovah is delivered, For in mount Zion and in Jerusalem there is an escape, As Jehovah hath said, And among the remnants whom Jehovah is calling!"

but we read, as English men, this section of scripture as:

(King James Version changing the tenses of the verbs)

"And it shall come to pass afterward, *that* I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions: And also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my spirit. And I will shew wonders in the heavens and in the earth, blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and the terrible day of the LORD come. And it shall come to pass, *that* whosoever shall call on the name of the LORD shall be delivered: for in mount Zion and in Jerusalem shall be deliverance, as the LORD hath said, and in the remnant whom the LORD shall call."

'Young's Literal Translation of the Holy Bible' gives us a wonderful instruction on the beauties of the Hebrew language and why we should conform to the world of the Hebrew prophet rather than having the Hebrew prophet conform to our world.

Preface to Young's Literal Translation of the Holy Bible

Robert Young, from Edinburgh, Scotland, on September 10, 1862 wrote, "This work, in its present form, is not to be considered as intended to come into competition with the ordinary use of the commonly received English Version of the Holy Scriptures, but simply as a strictly literal and idiomatic rendering of the Original Hebrew and Greek Texts. For about twenty years fully half his life-time—the Translator has had a desire to execute such a work, and has been engaged in Biblical pursuits tending to this end more or less exclusively; and now, at last, in the good providence of God, the desire has been accomplished. How far he has been able to carry out the just principles of Biblical Translation, founded on a solid and immoveable foundation, time alone will tell, and for this he confidently waits. As these principles are to some extent new, and adhered to with a severity never hitherto attempted, and as the Translator has perfect confidence in their accuracy and simplicity, he proceeds at once to state them distinctly and broadly, that not merely the learned, but the wayfaring man need not err in appreciating their value.

There are two modes of translation which may be adopted in rendering into our own language the writings of an ancient author; the one is, to bring him before us in such a manner as that we may regard him as our own; the other, to transport ourselves, on the contrary, over to him, adopting his situation modes of

speaking, thinking, acting,—peculiarities of age and race, air, gesture, voice, etc. Each of these plans has its advantages, but the latter is incomparably the better of the two, being suited—not for the ever-varying modes of thinking and acting of the men of the fifth, or the tenth, or the fifteenth, or some other century, but—for all ages alike. All attempts to make Moses or Paul act, or speak, or reason, as if they were Englishmen of the nineteenth century, must inevitably tend to change the translator into a paraphrast or a commentator, characters which, however useful, stand altogether apart from that of him, who, with a work before him in one language, seeks only to transfer it into another.

In prosecuting the plan thus adopted, a literal translation was indispensable. No other kind of rendering could place the reader in the position contemplated, side by side with the writer—prepared to think as he does, to see as he sees, to reason, to feel, to weep, and to exult along with him. His very conception of time, even in the minor accidents of the grammatical past, present, future, are to become our own. If he speaks of an event, as now passing, we are not, on the logical ground of its having in reality already transpired, to translate his present as if it were a past; or if, on the other hand, his imagination pictures the future as if even at this moment present, we are not translators but expounders, and that of a tame description, if we take the liberty to convert his time, and tense—the grammatical expression of his time—into our own. King James translators were almost entirely unacquainted with the two distinctive peculiarities of the Hebrew mode of thinking and speaking, admitted by the most profound Hebrew scholars in theory, though, from undue timidity, never carried out in practice, viz:—

- 1.) That the Hebrews were in the habit of using the past tense to express the certainty of an action taking place, even though the action might not really be performed for some time.
- 2.) That the Hebrews, in referring to events which might be either past or future, were accustomed to act on the principle of transferring themselves mentally to the period and place of the events themselves, and were not content with coldly viewing them as those of a bygone or still coming time; hence the very frequent use of the present tense.

These two great principles of the Hebrew language are substantially to be found in the works of Lee, Gesenius, Ewald, etc.; but the present writer has carried them out in translation much beyond what any of them ever contemplated, on the simple ground that, if they are true, they ought to be gone through with. While they affect very considerably the outward form of the translation, it is a matter of thankfulness that they do not touch the truth of a single Scripture doctrine—not even one.

Every effort has been made to secure a comparative degree of uniformity in rendering the original words and phrases. Thus, for example, the Hebrew verb *nathan*, which is rendered by King James' translators in sixty-seven different ways has been restricted and reduced to ten, and so with many others. It is the Translator's ever-growing conviction, that even this smaller number may be reduced still further.

It has been no part of the Translator's plan to attempt to form a New Hebrew or Greek Text—he has therefore somewhat rigidly adhered to the received ones. Where he has differed, it is generally, in reference to the punctuation and accentuation, the division of words and sentences. which, being merely traditional, are, of course, often imperfect For an explanation and vindication of these differences, the reader is referred to the "Concise Commentary," which is designed to supplement the present volume.

Style of the Sacred Writers

One of the first things that is likely to attract the attention of the Readers of this New Translation is its lively, picturesque, dramatic style, by which the inimitable beauty of the Original Text is more vividly brought out than by any previous Translation. It is true that the Revisers appointed by King James have occasionally imitated it, but only in a few familiar phrases and colloquialisms, chiefly in the Gospel

Narrative, and without having any settled principles of translation to guide them on the point. The exact force of the Hebrew tenses has long been a vexed question with critics, but the time cannot be far distant when the general principles of the late learned Professor Samuel Lee of Cambridge, with some modification, will be generally adopted in substance, if not in theory. It would be entirely out of place here to enter into details on this important subject, but a very few remarks appear necessary, and may not be unacceptable to the student.

1.) It would appear that the Hebrew writers, when narrating or describing events which might be either past or future (such as the case of Moses in reference to the Creation or the Deluge, on the one hand, and to the Coming of the Messiah or the Calamities which were to befall Israel, on the other), uniformly wrote as if they were alive at the time of the occurrence of the events mentioned, and as *eye-witnesses* of what they are narrating.

It would be needless to refer to special passages in elucidation or vindication of this principle essential to the proper understanding of the Sacred Text, as every page of this Translation affords abundant examples. It is only what common country people do in this land at the present day, and what not a few of the most popular writers in England aim at and accomplish—placing themselves and their readers in the times and places of the circumstances related.

This principle of translation has long been admitted by the best Biblical Expositors in reference to the Prophetic Delineation of Gospel times, but it is equally applicable and necessary to the historical narratives of Genesis, Ruth, etc.

2.) The Hebrew writers often express the *certainty of a thing taking place* by putting it in the past tense, though the actual fulfillment may not take place for ages. This is easily understood and appreciated when the language is used by Yahweh, as when He says! in Gen. 15:18, "Unto thy seed I have given this land;" and in 17:4, "I, lo, My covenant is with thee, and *thou hast become* a father of a multitude of nations."

The same thing is found in Gen. 23:11, where Ephron answers Abraham: "Nay, my lord, hear me; the field *I have given* to thee, and the cave that is in it; to thee *I have given* it; before the eyes of the sons of my people *I have given* it to thee; bury thy dead." And again in Abraham's answer to Ephron: "Only—if thou wouldst hear me—I *have given* the money of the field; accept from me, and I bury my dead there." Again in 2 Kings 5:6, the King of Syria, writing to the King of Israel, says: "Lo, I have sent unto thee Naaman, my servant, and *thou hast recovered him* from his leprosy,"—considering the King of Israel as his servant, a mere expression of the master's purpose is sufficient. In Judges 8:19, Gideon says to Zebah and Zalmunnah, "If ye had kept them alive, *I had not slain you.*" So in Deut.31:18, "For all the evils that *they have done*"—shall have done.

It would be easy to multiply examples, but the above may suffice for the present. Some of these forms of expression are preceded by the conjunction "and" (waw, in Hebrew), and a very common opinion has been that the conjunction in these cases has a concessive power, and that the verb is not to be translated past (though so in grammatical form), but future. This is, of course, only an evasion of the supposed difficulty, not a solution, and requires to be supported by the equally untenable hypothesis that a (so-called) future tense, when preceded by the same conjunction waw ("and,") often becomes a past. Notwithstanding these two converting hypotheses, there are numerous passages which have no conjunction before them, which can only be explained by the principle stated above.

3.) The Hebrew writers are accustomed to express laws, commands, etc., in four ways:

1st. By the regular imperative form, e.g., "Speak unto the people."

2nd. By the infinitive, "Every male of you is to be circumcised."

3rd. By the (so-called) future, "Let there be light ; " "Thou shalt do no murder ; " "Six days is work done."

4th. By the past tense, " Speak unto the sons of Israel, and thou hast said unto them."

There can be no good reason why these several peculiarities should not be exhibited in the translation of the Bible, or that they should be confounded, as they often are, in the Common Version. In common life among ourselves, these forms of expression are frequently used for imperatives, e.g., "Go and do this,"—" This is to be done first,"—" You shall go,"—" You go and finish it." There are few languages which afford such opportunities of a literal and idiomatic rendering of the Sacred Scriptures as the English tongue, and the present attempt will be found, it is believed, to exhibit this more than any other Translation.

View of Hebrew Tenses as seen in the Old Testament

The Hebrew has only two tenses, which, for want of better terms, may be called Past and Present. The past tense is either perfect or imperfect, e. g., 'I lived in this house five years,' or 'I have lived in this house five years; this distinction may and can only be known by the context, which must in all cases be viewed from the writer's standing-point. In every other instance of its occurrence, it points out either:

- 1.) A gentle imperative, e. g., "Lo, I have sent unto thee Nauman my servant, and thou *hast* recovered him from his leprosy;" see also Zech. 1. 3, etc. or
- 2.) A fixed determination that a certain thing shall be done, e. g., "Nay, my lord, hear me, the field *I have given to thee*, and the cave that is in it; to thee *I have given it*; before the eyes of the sons of my people *I have given it to thee*; bury thy dead;" and in the answer, "Only—if thou wouldst hear me—*I have given* the money of the field."

The present tense—as in the Modern Arabic, Syriac, and Amharic, the only living remains of the Semitic languages—besides its proper use, is used rhetorically for the future, there being no grammatical form to distinguish them; this, however, causes no more difficulty than it does in English, Turkish, Greek, Sanscrit, etc., the usages of which may be seen in the Extracts from the principal grammarians.

In every other instance of its occurrence, it points out an imperative, not so gently as when a preterite is used for this purpose, nor so stern as when the regular imperative form is employed, but more like the infinitive, "Thou art *to write* no more;" 'thou *mayest* write no more.'

The present participle differs from the present tense just in the same manner and to the same extent as "I am writing, or, I am a writer," does from, "I write, or, I do write."

The above view of the Hebrew tenses is equally applicable to all the Semitic languages, including the Ancient and Modern Arabic, the Ancient and Modern Syriac, the Ancient and Modern Ethiopic, the Samaritan, the Chaldee, and the Rabbinical Hebrew—not one of which is admitted to have the Waw Conversive.

Analysis of the Verbs in Genesis 9:12-15.

"And God saith, This *is* the token of the covenant that *I am making* between Me and you, and every living creature that *is* with you, for generations age-during; My bow *I have given* in the cloud, and it *hath* been for a token of a covenant between Me and the earth; and it *hath* come to pass, in My sending a cloud over the earth, that the bow *hath* been seen in the cloud, and *I have* remembered My covenant, that is between Me and you, and every living creature of all flesh, and the waters *become* no more a deluge to destroy all flesh."

Verse 12

"And God saith:" The present tense is used, according to the almost universal custom of the Hebrews, etc., to bring up the narrative to the present time. The conjunction, 'and,' has no special or logical significance,

but is used simply to break the abruptness of the opening sentence, as the Hebrews scarcely ever allow a verb in the present or past tense to commence a sentence, especially in prose, without some other word preceding it; the only other way would have been to put the nominative before the verb, but this, though occasionally used, is not agreeable to Hebrew taste.

"This (is) the token:" The Hebrew substantive verb *is*, in the present tense, very frequently omitted: in the past tense, it is very rarely, if ever, omitted.

"That I am making, (lit. giving):" The participle is more strikingly expressive of present action than if the present tense had been employed.

"That (is) with you:" The present tense of the substantive verb is understood as above.

"My bow I have given in the cloud:" The past tense here is used to express a fixed determination that the circumstance mentioned is undoubtedly to take place; most unwarrantably does the KJ Version translate as a present, 'I do set;' while the theory of the Waw Conversive has no place here, since there is no Waw to work on.

"And it hath become:" The fixed determination is here continued from the preceding clause; on no grammatical principle can it be rendered present, much less future, as it is in the KJ Version; the Waw here can have no converting power, there being no future preceding it to rest on, as the roles of Waw Convertive imperatively demand.

"It hath come to pass—the bow hath been seen—I have remembered:" —though rendered future in the KJ Version, are all past, being preceded by pasts, and are to be explained by the same principle—of expressing the certainty of a future action by putting it in the past, owing to the determination of the speaker that it must be.

The only remaining verb in the 15th verse is correctly put in the present tense; the speaker, going forward in thought to the period when the events alluded to take place, declares graphically that 'the waters *become* no more a deluge to destroy all flesh.'

Summary of the New View of the Hebrew Verb

From these pages the scholar can scarcely fail to infer that:

- 1.) The form of the Hebrew verb '*yiqtol*,' denotes a real present tense, and not a future tense:
 - a.) Because it is admitted by Ewald, Gesenius, Lee, Rodiger, and every other Hebrew Grammarian of name, that it is so in numberless places, and because there are thousands of instances where the KJ English Version, and all other versions, ancient and modern, do rightly translate it as a present.
 - b.) Because there are numerous passages where it cannot possibly be a future: and as it is impossible, in the very nature of things, for a real future to express present time, -whereas it is very common, in almost all languages, rhetorically to express futurity by a present, it must be a present, and not a future.
 - c.) Because in all the Cognate Semitic Dialects it is regarded as a present.
- 2.) The form of the Hebrew verb '*qatal*' denotes a past tense (perfect or imperfect). It is also used idiomatically:-
 - a.) To express a gentle imperative; this is universally agreed by all Hebrew Grammarians to be the

case when it to preceded by a regular imperative, e.g., " Speak and say," lit., Speak, and thou halt said; but this limitation of theirs arises from imperfect acquaintance with the facts of the case, as there are many passages where there is no imperil- tire preceding, yet where the past tense is used to express a command, e. g., Zech. 1. 3, " And thou hast said," i.e., "Say thou." This idiom is also admitted to be common in all the Cognate Semitic Dialects.

b.) To express a fixed determination that a certain thing must and shall be. This idiom is distinctly admitted by the above-mentioned Hebrew Grammarians, and is common, not only in the Cognate Semitic Dialects, but in the Greek New Testament, and also in the Greek and Latin Classics, as shown by Stuart, Winer, Macknight, Kuhner, and others.

The Hebrew verb tenses were changed by the Septuagint Translators. They had with the freedom which characterizes their whole work both in style and sentiments deemed the Hebrew idioms¹ too colloquial for the fastidious Greeks, and too simple for the dignity of literary composition; and as all succeeding translators, without an exception, were under the spell of the sacred character of that Version, it is no wonder, though much to be regretted, that their example was followed. Of late years there has been a very strong tendency in translators and expositors to adhere more than ever to the exact form of the Hebrew and Greek Tenses, but the present Translation is the first and only one in which it is carried out systematically.

¹ 1.) That the Hebrews were in the habit of using the past tense to express the certainty of an action taking place, even though the action might not really be performed for some time. 2.) That the Hebrews, in referring to events which might be either past or future, were accustomed to act on the principle of transferring themselves mentally to the period and place of the events themselves, and were not content with coldly viewing them as those of a bygone or still coming time; hence the very frequent use of the present tense.