

Korsak, Mary Phil. *At the Start: Genesis Made New*. New York/London: Doubleday, 1993. 237 pp. \$22.00.

Mrs. Korsak spent "the better part of nine years" producing this literal, "fresh, primitive," jarringly raw translation of the first book of the Bible. Its title is a literal translation of the first word in Hebrew, which gives the book its title in the original language.

She explains her method as following German and French translators Buber and Rosenzweig, Fleg and Chouraqui, in choosing only one English word to translate one Hebrew word in every context, and finding or making cognate words. The result gives the English reader the flavor of the original, indeed, but produces some strange and most unidiomatic translations. The facts are that in every language words have more than one meaning each, according to context, and that idioms are not parallel from one language to another. In addition, the root system of vocabulary in all the Semitic languages builds nouns, adjectives, etc., on mainly three-letter root verbs (a small minority of "denominative" verbs are, on the contrary, derived from substantives), while English and other Indo-European languages characteristically show no spelling relationship whatever among word groups related in meaning. Thus, to impose the one pattern on the other produces often weird or absurd results. This procedure may give non-Hebrew readers a raw beauty of text and an insight into the Hebrew language structure and vocabulary, but to anyone who can read the original language, it can be constantly irritating with its lack of idiomatic nuances.

In Gen 1, etc., for example, the literal "call to" is simply the Hebrew expression for to "name" something or someone. For the *kî tôb* refrain she uses "How good!" whereas later she has to violate her own rule by translating *kî* as quite consistently "yes," and even, as it really means, "when" and "because/for" and "that" as a relative pronoun. In 28:15, 29:32, 30:30, 33, 31:36, etc., she was forced to choose one of these more appropriate senses of *kî*; thus her method at times breaks down.

She always translates *bānîm* as "sons," even when the context clearly or possibly includes females; the interjection *hinnēh* is always "Here!" which is often fine, but could be "Look!" "Asphalt" in 6:14 is anachronistic, coming before the story of the great Flood when bitumen would have first been produced. In 4:10 the disjunctive accent and lack of grammatical agreement in number are ignored by the translation "The voice of your brother's blood"; the original is more dramatic: "A voice! [or, Hark! or Listen!] Your brother's blood. . . ."

It is jarring to find *'ishshah* always translated "woman," never "wife." Equally jarring is the constant use of "bred," "breeding," etc., instead of "bearing" so-and-so, or "fathering" him/her. As she states in her "Translator's Postscript," this method "enables the reader to perceive patterns and associations in the text that remain hidden in other translations," but it makes the translation seem crude in a language not built on the root system of the Semitic languages. The root base thus makes for her translation "These are the breedings of the skies and the earth at their creation" (2:4), instead of "history," or even

the older "generations." Other oddities due to this method are "the one of the month" (for "first," 8:13); "childling" (11:30); "kings who kinged" (36:31); "dooms" (8:21, 12:3), though that root produces "was less" in 16:4, 5—a needed violation of her method. Another obliged violation is her idiomatic translation of *lipne* as "before" (in time or space) in many places, as well as the literal "facing" in 11:28, etc. The literal "heavy" should often be "wealthy" or "honored" in various contexts, thus sounding clumsy in the literal translation.

One nice point is that Korsak's translation shows the relation between Man/Adam (or humanity) and earth, 'Ā/*ādām* and 'ādāmāh, but to do so it uses "groundling" as well as, of course, "ground." So in 4:1 we read: "The groundling knew his woman Eve."

One of the most bothersome literalisms is her handling of the Hebrew infinitive absolute construction, which denotes emphasis (sometimes the idea of continuation, if it follows instead of preceding the verb of the same root). As did the translators of the LXX, which led to the literal Greek translations of the idiom in the NT (with an infinitive preceding a cognate verb), she simply translates literally, as in 43:3, 7: "The man witnessed! he witnessed against us," and "Did we know, know that he was to say . . .," and dozens of other occurrences, instead of: "Did the man indeed witness against us," and "Did we really know that he was to say . . ."

The literal translation as simple future of imperfect-tense verbs with *waw* conjunctive instead of *waw* consecutive (which would mean past tense) completely misses the delicate nuance of the subjunctive, as in 42:2: "Go down there, supply us from there / We shall live and not die!" The purpose-subjunctive, if recognized, would make a meaningful translation—"so that we may live and not die." Cf. 43:8; 44:21, 28; 47:19, among many others.

The comparative use of the preposition *min* is ignored in 27:1, 32:11, and other places, where "too" or in some contexts "more than" would convey the meaning more accurately. The copulative force of the pronoun without any verb is lost in 27:13 and many other places by a literal translation, such as "Myself, YHWH the Elohim of your father Abraham," instead of what it really means, "I am YWHH the God of. . . ." In 17:21 and other texts, I doubt that anything would be lost by correctly writing "whom" instead of "who": "But my pact I will set up with Isaac / who Sarah shall breed for you at the set time."

According to Korsak, Rebekah "fell off the camel" in 24:64, instead of "dismounted from the camel." (I used to tell my Hebrew students that she "fell for him at first sight.")

Many other translations could be cited that missed the real meaning or else were forced to violate her method because the one translation simply could not be made to fit the context. What has been mentioned doubtless reflects one Hebrew teacher's frustrations with this rigid translation; no doubt there are readers who are entranced instead of repelled by this work, which, according to the blurb, is "already causing a stir in Biblical and scholarly circles."