

Religion and the Environment

Edited by Ronald A. Simkins

From Dominion to Stewardship?

The Ecology of Biblical Translation

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Introduction

[1] When, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, I began university teaching, one of my courses was an introduction to religion. When I reached the section on religion and the environment, I, along with most of my contemporaries, taught what we had learned from Lynn White, whose work was very widely and highly regarded at that time. As I recall, the text we used for this class was also much influenced by White. Thus, an image, captioned as “typical” of the East, showed a pair of humans virtually overwhelmed by nature: trees, plants, flowers, wild animals. By contrast, the “typical” picture from the West featured large-scale humans in the foreground, almost blotting out the vestiges of a desiccated and diminished nature.

[2] These scenes, we were assured, were emblematic of the vastly different views of nature that characterized the East and the West: the former saw humans as integral to the rest of nature, with which they were to live harmoniously; we Westerners dominate nature, pillaging what is, after all, there only for our gratification and satisfaction. Such views seem hopelessly naïve and simplistic some four decades later. But the questions White raised, or at least some of them, remain starkly relevant to this day.

[3] Among White’s arsenal of assault weapons on the West was the Bible, in particular its dangerous misreading on the part of translators and interpreters. After all, if we are divinely

commanded to “have dominion” over all the rest of creation (so, apparently, Genesis 1:28), is it any surprise that Western, especially Christian, history is replete with examples of environmental degradation and destruction? When we are given leave to “rule over” the animal kingdom, are we not to think of the despots who lorded over ancient society rather than the benevolent monarchs of today’s Europe?

[4] It is obvious that an issue of this magnitude can be at most partially addressed in an article such as this. Nonetheless, there is every reason to believe that we can make a contribution, albeit modest, to an issue, the environment, that is even more pressing than it was when White initially made his observations. In particular, we will look closely at how translators have handled selected passages from the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament that relate to humans and the rest of the created order. In order to do so, we will draw examples from approximately two-dozen English-language versions of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, along with the influential King James Version of 1611. In addition, we include, where appropriate, four additional Jewish versions that are not very well known. For the benefit of those with reading knowledge of Hebrew, we provide the key word(s) in Hebrew for each example as well.

[5] Below is a listing of these translations, along with the date of their most recent version or revision. I have grouped them into three categories, ranging from the most literal to the freest. In so doing, we are simply describing, not evaluating, the approach of the respective translators (for evaluation of these versions, see Greenspoon 2005; Kraus). Further comments on specific versions are reserved for the discussion of individual passages (for a history of the Jewish versions, see Greenspoon 2003):

Literal Translations: King James Version (1611), New King James Version (1982), Twenty-First Century King James Version (1994), New American Standard Bible (1996), Revised Standard Version = Revised Standard Version (1952), New Revised Standard Version (1989), English Standard Version (2001), New American Bible (1991), New Jerusalem Bible (1985), ArtScroll Tanach (1996), Schocken Bible (1995).

Non-Literal Translations (with Extended Vocabulary): New International Version (1984), New International Reader’s Version (1998), Today’s New International Version (2005), Contemporary English Version (1995), New English Bible (1971), Revised English Bible (1989), Jewish Publication Society Tanakh (1999), Holman Christian Standard Bible (2003), New Living Translation (1996).

Non-Literal Translations (with Limited Language): The Living Bible (1971), New Century Version (1991), God’s Word (1995), Good News Bible (1976), New Life Version (1969), The Message (2002), Cotton Patch Gospel (1968 – 1973).

Additional Jewish Translations: Alter, *The Five Books of Moses* (2004); Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (2001); Plaut, *The Torah* (2005); Stein, *The Contemporary Torah* (2006)

[6] Although few, if any issues relating to religion, and especially to the Bible, are free of controversy, I hope that we can all agree on the following: (1) Within the United States, there are large numbers of individuals who base their beliefs and value systems on what (they think) is in the Bible; (2) There are few Americans (or other readers of English-language versions) who are able to read the Hebrew (and the few verses of Aramaic) in the original language; (3) Therefore, the Bible in translation is, for all intents and purposes, *the* Bible for most people today (in my opinion, this should not be the case for contemporary Jews, but alas it remains so in spite of my critiques); (4) Consequently, although very few people take the time to analyze the biblical text in the detail that we do here, nonetheless Bible translations are influential and what they contain does matter.

[7] As an aside, we can note – with Letters to the Editor as a trusty gauge – the recurring instances of the pervasiveness of Bible translation in the public sphere. Under the headline “Beetles Don’t Rule” (from the *Omaha World Herald* of 1 April 2008), a correspondent writes, in opposition to “a \$500,000 federal grant to protect the endangered Salt Creek tiger beetle”: “The Bible says to be fruitful and multiply, fill the Earth and subdue it, have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves. It does not say that the beetles are to rule over us or control us.”

[8] In what follows, we look in detail at nine passages from the Hebrew Bible: seven from the Torah and one each from the Prophets and the Writings (using the tripartite division traditional among Jews). With only one exception (Genesis 1:31), these are passages that talk about how humans fit in with and relate to the rest of the created or natural order. For each passage, we provide an extended discussion of its relevance to environmental issues and of the range of renderings we present. We then list the English translations as they appear in selected versions from the list above. We start with renderings that are literal and move from these to texts that represent a freer approach; typically, we also include one or more of the most recent English-language versions by Jewish translators.

[9] Through this format, we hope to demonstrate several points: (1) Determining exactly what the biblical writers intended to say on environmental issues (as on a variety of other matters) is not always easy; (2) Translators exhibit a wide variety of approaches or methods to communicate (what they believe to be) the meaning of the text to contemporary readers; (3) No hard-and-fast rules apply when evaluating a given version as “environmentally-friendly” or otherwise, since a great deal has to do with the reader’s perception of the words chosen and the degree to which he/she places a single verse within a larger context; (4) The method that I adopt and exemplify here is an important first step towards serious engagement with the biblical text on environmental issues, even for those with firsthand knowledge of the Hebrew.

Genesis 1:28

[10] In many ways, the first passage at which we look, Genesis 1:28, is also one of the most discussed (if not the most discussed) example of the deleterious nature of relying on the Bible to help resolve the contemporary environmental crisis. In point of fact, chapter 1 of Genesis does establish a rather rigid hierarchical structure, with God at the top, the created beings at the bottom, and humans (also, of course, created) occupying a central portion of the vast expanse separating creator from created.

[11] In this context, so it appears, humans are divinely commanded to bring order to the other living beings, Because this is envisioned as a complex and arduous task, the verbs describing such action are harsh: subdue, have dominion, rule over (the latter, as noted above, would have been understood in light of the absolute monarchs of antiquity). Although some have expressed doubt, it is clear that “have dominion over,” found in almost all English-language renderings of this verse, correctly captures the signification of the Hebrew root *rdh* (רדה).

[12] Are we then to conclude that a more general, and therefore less violent verb, such as “hold sway,” is inaccurate? The asking and answering of such a question is not, in my opinion, nearly so clear-cut as most would assume. Let us suggest, first of all, that those who look at a translation of the Bible are more prone than those who read it in the original to take a verse out of its immediate or larger context. For such individuals, a cited passage is often believed to encapsulate the Bible’s teaching on a given issue. Thus, it might be suggested, where the biblical view on a given subject is nuanced, translators should perhaps be given some leeway to allow for the fact that their readers may consult this, and only this, verse in this, and only this, version.

[13] In our instance, however, is it not the case that the context supports the stronger rendering, such as “have dominion over”? There are several points in favor of this position. As it well known, critical scholars have, for well over a century, divided the first chapters of Genesis into a Priestly account (Gen 1:1–2:4a) and a Yahwistic account (Genesis 2:4b–3:24). Among the demonstrable differences in these accounts could well be the emphasis on dominion here “versus” a more caring concern on the part of humans in Gen 2:15 (see below). Internally (that is, within the P account), human actions in subduing the “chaos” of wild animals would mirror God’s actions in his initial chaos-quelling acts of creation.

[14] Such a mirror or parallel also calls to mind that only of humans is it stated that they were created in God’s “image.” Whatever that terms means, it does seem to connote that humans would or should act toward the rest of nature as God acts toward all of nature (i.e., the created world). In this light, I believe that we can arrive at a clearer understanding of the Hebrew by using the term “subdue” for the Hebrew root *kbš* (כבש) and “hold sway” for *rdh* (רדה), thereby allowing for a changed stance as humans and animals dwell together over an extended period of time. This is, I note, not found in any of the versions listed below.

[15] I should add that here, as elsewhere, I am less certain about my specific translation suggestion than I am about the need for translators and interpreters to consider carefully what they put forth. Such careful consideration does indeed slow down the process of preparing, and consulting, a modern-language version, but it is – in my opinion, at least – time very well spent. Listed below are a range of English translations of this verse.

King James Version

And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

Schocken Bible

God blessed them,
God said to them:
Bear fruit and be many and fill the earth
and subdue it!
Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the fowl of the heavens, and all
living things that crawl about upon the earth!

New International Version

¶ God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

New Living Translation

¶ God blessed them and told them, “Multiply and fill the earth and subdue it. Be masters over the fish and birds and all the animals.”

The Message

God blessed them:
“Prose! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge!
Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air,
for every living thing that moves on the face of Earth.”

Alter, The Five Books of Moses

And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and conquer it, and hold sway over fish of the sea and the fowl of the heavens and every beast that crawls upon the earth.”

Plaut, The Torah

God then blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and tame it; hold sway over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky, and over every animal that creeps on the earth.”

Genesis 1:31

[16] Our second example comes from the end of Genesis, which also marks, biblically, the end of the process of creation. This is, by the way, the only passage I have chosen that does not deal with the interaction of humans and the remainder of nature. Rather, it highlights the divine judgment on what God has created: It was really, truly, extraordinarily good! Given the fact that, from many perspectives, the created world, including nature, is flawed (perhaps fatally) from its inception, this very positive appraisal needs to be highlighted.

[17] But, we need to inquire, is such an exclamation justified by the Hebrew text? I would say it is, but at the same time I cannot wholly dismiss the bland, “And it was good.” And yet, such a rendering is at the least incomplete. The Hebrew interjects the term *hnh* (הנה),

traditionally translated “behold” and now often glossed with a word like “see.” To leave this word out of the translation here is not a wise or supportable position, in my view.

[18] “Very good” is an adequate rendering of the Hebrew at this point, but does not really rise to the occasion. Already, the Septuagint translator recognized this through the use of the rarer *λίαν* rather than the more common *σφόδρα*. In agreement with the good judgment of this individual (or these individuals) of over 2,300 years ago, I also feel that something less prosaic, more enthusiastic is required. To get this point across, I also favor moving the word “all” from the previous clause to this one. And, to top it off, I like the use of the explanation point at the end of the sentence. (We of course need to recall that the Hebrew writers had no analogous way to reflect their excitement, or in this case God’s excitement). Thus, I am very comfortable with the rendering of the Contemporary English Version here. I am aware that other readers may find the stately language of the *King James Version* or *New Revised Standard Version* more suitable for a summation and evaluation of God’s acts of creation as systematically portrayed in the earlier verses of this chapter.

King James Version

And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.
And the evening and the morning were the sixth day.

New Revised Standard Version

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Schocken Bible

Now God saw all that he had made,
and here: it was exceedingly good!
There was setting, there was dawning: the sixth day.

New International Version

¶ God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning – the sixth day.

Contemporary English Version

¶ God looked at what he had done. All of it was very good! Evening came and then morning – that was the sixth day.

New Living Translation

Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was excellent in every way. This all happened on the sixth day.

The Message

¶ God looked over everything he had made;
it was so good, so very good!
It was evening, it was morning –
Day Six.

Plaut, *The Torah*

God then surveyed all that [God] had made, and look – it was very good!
And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Genesis 2:15

[19] As we remarked above, Genesis 2:15 stands somewhat in contrast to verse 28 from the previous chapter. Those who hold to the Documentary Hypothesis see this as but one of many contrasts between the P and the J sources. It is not, however, necessary to accept any scholarly view to discern such differences and perhaps even the reasons for them.

[20] In this case, there is an emphasis on “caring” or “caring for” that is absent from Genesis 1. This appears in the second verb, *šmr* (שמר), for which a translation of “keep” is perfectly acceptable in isolation, but inadequate for this context. I prefer “take care of,” found in versions popular with both Jews and Protestants, or one of its near synonyms.

[21] The first verb in the Hebrew is *ʿbd* (עבד), which is an often-used Hebrew root for “work.” That being the case, “to work” is, in my opinion, the simple and the best rendering here.

[22] Some English-language versions seem to blur the distinctions that separate the two Hebrew roots. This is not warranted by the Hebrew, nor is it wise. As is the case with Genesis 1:28, the argument can also be made here that a process is envisioned: even within the Garden of Eden (and certainly outside of it), the land, and what it produces, does not easily yield its fruit – at least not initially. The land must indeed be “worked” at first; later on, it must be “taken care of” to insure that it not revert to its earlier status. In all of this, humans have the central role. Readers are asked to determine for themselves whether they sense a significant difference in the human relationship with the land as it is portrayed, for example, in the *King James Version* as compared to the *Contemporary English Version*.

King James Version

And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.

New Revised Standard Version

¶ The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

New American Bible

The LORD God then took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it.

New International Version

¶ The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

Contemporary English Version

¶ The LORD God put the man in the Garden of Eden to take care of it and to look after it.

Friedman, Commentary on the Torah

And YHWH God took the human and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and to watch over it.

Exodus 23:12

[23] This verse is another formulation of the Sabbath commandment. In general, it is close to the form found in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 (there are differences in wording between these two as well). As with previous (and successive) examples, our discussion here demonstrates the need to pay careful and close attention (some may say excruciatingly so) to the wording of the Hebrew.

[24] In this case, there are three verbs to which attention must be paid: *šbt* (שבת), *nwh* (נוח), and *npš* (נפש). Because, as is obvious, there are three different roots in Hebrew, translators should, in my opinion, use three different verbs in English. The first root, from which the transliteration Shabbat (or, more distantly, Sabbath) derives, is best rendered “cease” (the addition of “from work,” not found in the Hebrew, does serve to clarify what is intended). Because the Hebrew has no negative in this clause, it is best to avoid phrasing such as “do not work.” The second verb describes the condition (or conditions) to be accorded to animals on the seventh day. “Rest” is a perfectly good rendering here. Because the root here is *nwh*, translators should avoid (as many have) using “rest” for the earlier occurrence of *šbt* above, even though in other contexts “rest” is an excellent equivalence for the *šbt* root.

[25] The root of the third verb, *npš*, is better attested as a noun, with the meaning of person, vitality, or (with some reservations) soul. It cannot be used of living beings other than humans. Such beings, in fact all beings, can rest, but only humans can “be refreshed” (the Schocken Bible’s “pause for breath” [so also Alter’s “catch their breath”] makes clear the etymological connection between the verb and the noun, but does not seem quite apt as a description of a day-long activity [as opposed to a momentary occurrence]).

[26] As observed as early as Genesis 1:28, the authors of the Hebrew Bible accept and promote a hierarchical structure in the universe. Within that structure, as we are discovering, there is ample room for humans to show sympathy for, even empathy with, other beings. We speak of these as “humane” actions, a term that the biblical writers would acknowledge even though its precise formulation was unknown to them. In the examples that follow, readers will notice that many versions keep distinct the three verbs mentioned above, although they accomplish this in different ways. Readers may compare these versions with those that, in an effort to “simplify,” obliterate meaningful distinctions in the Hebrew.

King James Version

Six days thou shalt do thy work, and on the seventh day thou shalt rest: that thine ox and thine ass may rest, and the son of thy handmaid, and the stranger, may be refreshed.

New American Standard Bible

Six days you are to do your work, but on the seventh day you shall cease from labor in order that your ox and your donkey may rest, and the son of your female slave, as well as your stranger, may refresh themselves.

New Revised Standard Version

¶ Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed.

New Jerusalem Bible

¶ For six days you will do your work, and on the seventh you will rest, so that your ox and your donkey may rest and the child of your slave-girl have a breathing space, and the alien too.

Schocken Bible

¶ For six days you are to make your labor, but on the seventh day, you are to cease, in order that your ox and your donkey may rest and the son of your handmaid and the sojourner may pause-for-breath.

New International Version

¶ Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest and the slave born in your household, and the alien as well, may be refreshed.

Contemporary English Version

¶ Work the first six days of the week, but rest and relax on the seventh day. This law is not only for you, but for your oxen, donkeys, and slaves, as well as for any foreigners among you.

Jewish Publication Society Tanakh

¶ Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall cease from labor, in order that your ox and your ass may rest, and that your bondman and the stranger may be refreshed.

New Living Translation

¶ Work for six days, and rest on the seventh. This will give your ox and your donkey a chance to rest. It will also allow the people of your household, including your slaves and visitors, to be refreshed.

Alter, The Five Books of Moses

Six days shall you do your deeds and on the seventh day you shall cease, so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and your bondman and the sojourner catch their breath.

Leviticus 25:2-5

[27] For our purposes, this passage from Leviticus shares with Genesis 1:31 an interest in the rendering of a single phrase; while there it was the rather common evaluation, “It was very good,” here the phrase is a distinctive one – composed of the doubling of a root we have already seen: *šbt* (שבת). The phrase in question is *šbt šbtm* (שבת שבתון); of its fewer than a dozen occurrences throughout the Hebrew Bible, one is in verse 4, with the closely related *šnt* [year of] *šbtm* [שנת שבתון] in verse 5).

[28] Its exact signification is elusive, but this terminological piling on of “Shabbats” surely has the ultimate purpose of highlighting the distinctiveness of one of the Bible’s most revolutionary ideas: allowing the land itself to have a periodic rest. And, while we might see such a practice in terms of its benefits to humans, the biblical text hones in on its value to the land as a living organism, akin to humans and animals in requiring a periodic time out.

[29] How can we express this thought in English? The rendering of the King James Version, followed by some later versions, is “Sabbath [or year] of rest”; while technically acceptable, such wording is, if I may put it this way, anemic – it is no way to announce and advertise a revolutionary notion. At the least, we need the “complete rest” found in the Jewish Publication Society Tanakh and other texts. The Message’s “complete and total rest,” while adding words not found in the Hebrew, manages to come closer to the excitement of the Hebrew than other renderings. Alas, Alter’s “absolute rest” seems rather severe (or perhaps too close to an ad for a brand of vodka), while the New Jerusalem Bible’s “sabbatical rest,” although sincerely desired by all academicians, appears out-of-place here. Finally, we are led to wonder why the Schocken Bible has the identical “Sabbath of Sabbath-ceasing” in both verses 4 and 5, where the Hebrew (as noted above) differs. The Jewish year 5768 (fall 2007 – fall 2008) is a Sabbatical year in the Land of Israel (this regulation applied only there). As readers look at the following renderings, they might consider which ones most vividly celebrate this unique period of rest bestowed upon the land.

King James Version

²Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When ye come into the land which I give you, then shall the land keep a sabbath unto the LORD. ³Six years thou shalt sow thy field, and six years thou shalt prune thy vineyard, and gather in the fruit thereof; ⁴But in the seventh year shall be a sabbath of rest unto the land, a sabbath for the LORD: thou shalt neither sow thy field, nor prune thy vineyard. ⁵That which groweth of its own accord of thy harvest thou shalt not reap, neither gather the grapes of thy vine undressed: for it is a year of rest unto the land.

New American Standard Bible

²Speak to the sons of Israel, and say to them, When you come into the land which I shall give you, then the land shall have a sabbath to the LORD. ³Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in its crop, ⁴but during the seventh year the land shall have a sabbath rest, a sabbath to the LORD; you shall not sow your field nor prune

your vineyard. ⁵Your harvest's aftergrowth you shall not reap, and your grapes of untrimmed vines you shall not gather; the land shall have a sabbatical year.

New Revised Standard Version

²Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the LORD. ³Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; ⁴but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the LORD: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. ⁵You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land.

New Jerusalem Bible

¶ ²Speak to the Israelites and say to them: When you enter the country which I am giving you, the land must keep a Sabbath's rest for Yahweh. ³For six years you will sow your field, for six years you will prune your vineyard and gather its produce. ⁴But in the seventh year the land will have a sabbatical rest, a Sabbath for Yahweh. You will neither sow your field, nor prune your vineyard, ⁵nor reap any grain which has grown of its own accord, nor gather the grapes from your untrimmed vine. It will be a year of rest for the land.

Schocken Bible

²Speak to the Children of Israel, and say to them:
When you enter the land that I am giving you,
the land is to cease, a Sabbath-ceasing to YHWH.
³For six years you are to sow your field,
for six years you are to prune your vineyard,
then you are to gather in its produce,
⁴but in the seventh year
there shall be a Sabbath of Sabbath-ceasing for the land,
a Sabbath to YHWH:
your field you are not to sow,
your vineyard you are not to prune,
⁵the aftergrowth of your harvest you are not to harvest,
the grapes of your consecrated-vines you are not to amass;
a Sabbath of Sabbath-ceasing shall there be for the land!

The Message

²Speak to the People of Israel. Tell them: When you enter the land which I am going to give you, the land will observe a Sabbath to GOD. ³Sow your fields, prune your vineyards, and take in your harvests for six years. ⁴But the seventh year the land will take a Sabbath of complete and total rest, a Sabbath to GOD; you will not sow your fields or prune your vineyards.

⁵Don't reap what grows of itself; don't harvest the grapes of your untended vines. The land gets a year of complete and total rest.

Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*

²Speak to the Israelites, and you shall say to them: When you come into the land that I am about to give you, the land shall keep a Sabbath to the Lord. ³Six years you shall sow your fields and six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in its yield. ⁴And in the seventh year there shall be an absolute Sabbath for the land, a Sabbath to the Lord. Your field you shall not sow and your vineyard you shall not prune. ⁵The aftergrowth of your harvest you shall not reap and the grapes of your untrimmed vines you shall not pick. There shall be an absolute Sabbath year, if we do not sow and do not gather in our yield?

Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*

²Speak to the children of Israel. And you shall say to them: When you will come to the land that I am giving to you, then the land shall have Sabbath of YHWH. ³Six years you shall seed your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and you shall gather its produce. ⁴And in the seventh year the land shall have a Sabbath, a ceasing, a Sabbath for YHWH: you shall not seed your field, and you shall not prune your vineyard, ⁵you shall not reap your harvest's free growth, and you shall not cut off your untrimmed grapes. The land shall have a year ceasing.

Leviticus 26:3-6

[30] With this thought in mind, I wish to call attention to a verse in the next chapter of Leviticus, namely, 26:6. The reason for my doing so is another occurrence of the root *šbt* (שבת), one that only readers of the Jewish versions (among those on my list) would be able to detect.

[31] The verbal form of the root in this verse is known as the *hiph'il*, which is generally described as causative in nature; that is, a verb meaning "to die" in the simple or *qal* form would mean "to kill [that is, to cause to die]" in the *hiph'il*. Thus it is that the Jewish versions have "cause [or, make] to cease" (in others, a slightly distant, but still discernible "give respite"). Such a rendering allows English readers to make a connection that would be immediately apparent to Hebrew readers: in chapter 25, the land is granted a "complete rest" every seven years; in chapter 26, that rest (or one close to it) will become perpetual if the people follow God's laws and faithfully observe his commandments (so 26:3 and elsewhere). Additionally, this latter observation serves to remind us that within the Hebrew Bible, the people of Israel and the land of Israel are inextricably linked – for better and, alas, for worse. It is often asserted that users of most biblical translations are denied access to wordplays and similar devices that would be apparent to those who know Hebrew. This example provides a test case, as it were, for readers to decide how much they value the more literal approach in tying together verses and concepts from one chapter (or portion) of the Bible with those of another.

King James Version

³If ye walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments, and do them; ⁴Then I will give you rain in due season, and the land shall yield her increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. ⁵And your threshing shall reach unto the vintage, and the vintage shall reach unto the sowing time: and ye shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land safely. ⁶And I will give peace in the land, and ye shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid: and I will rid evil beasts out of the land, neither shall the sword go through your land.

New American Standard Bible

³If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments so as to carry them out, ⁴then I shall give you rains in their season, so that the land will yield its produce and the trees of the field will bear their fruit. ⁵Indeed, your threshing will last for you until grape gathering, and grape gathering will last until sowing time. You will thus eat your food to the full and live securely in your land. ⁶I shall also grant peace in the land, so that you may lie down with no one making you tremble. I shall also eliminate harmful beasts from the land, and no sword will pass through your land.

New Revised Standard Version

¶ ³If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, ⁴I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. ⁵Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and the vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and live securely in your land. ⁶And I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and no one shall make you afraid; I will remove dangerous animals from the land, and no sword shall go through your land.

Schocken Bible

¶ ³If by my laws you walk, and my commands you keep, and observe them, ⁴then I will give-forth your rains in their set-time, so that the earth gives-forth its yield and the trees of the field give-forth their fruit. ⁵Threshing will overtake vintage for you, and vintage will overtake sowing; you shall eat your food to being-satisfied, and be settled in security in your land. ⁶I will give peace throughout the land, so that you will lie down with none to make you tremble, I will cause-to-cess wild beasts from the land, and a sword shall not cross through your land.

Contemporary English Version

¶³Faithfully obey my laws, ⁴and I will send rain to make your crops grow and your trees produce fruit. ⁵Your harvest of grain and grapes will be so abundant, that you won't know what to do with it all. You will eat and be satisfied, and you will live in safety. ⁶I will bless your country with peace, and you will rest without fear. I will wipe out the dangerous animals and protect you from enemy attacks.

Jewish Publication Society Tanakh

¶³If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments, ⁴I will grant your rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit. ⁵Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and your vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your fill of bread and dwell securely in your land.

¶⁶I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down untroubled by anyone; I will give the land respite from vicious beasts, and no sword shall cross your land.

Alter, The Five Books of Moses

³If you go by My statutes and keep my Commands and do them, ⁴I shall give you rains in their season, and the land will give its yield and the tree of the field will give its fruit. ⁵And your threshing will overtake the vintage, and the vintage will overtake the sowing, and you will eat your bread to the full, and you will dwell securely in your land. ⁶And I shall set peace in the land, and you will lie down with none to cause terror, and I shall make evil beasts cease from the land, and no sword will pass through your land.

Friedman, Commentary on the Torah

³If you will go by my laws, and if you will observe my commandments, and you will do them: ⁴then I shall give your rains in their time, and the earth will give its crop, and the tree of the field will give its fruit, ⁵and threshing will extend to vintage for you, and vintage will extend to seeding, and you will eat your bread to the full, and you will live in security in your land, ⁶and I shall give peace in the land, and you will lie down with no one making you afraid, and I shall make wild animals cease from the land, and a sword will no pass through your land,

Plaut, The Torah

³If you follow my laws and faithfully observe My commandments, ⁴I will grant your rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit. ⁵Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and your vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your fill of bread and dwell securely in your land. ⁶I will grant peace in the land, and you shall

lie down untroubled by anyone; I will give the land respite from vicious beasts, and no sword shall cross your land.

Stein, *The Contemporary Torah*

³If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments, ⁴I will grant your rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit. ⁵Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and your vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your fill of bread dwell securely in your land. ⁶I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down untroubled by anyone; I will give the land respite from vicious beasts, and no sword shall cross your land.

Deuteronomy 20:19-20

[32] Deuteronomy 20 is well known for the first eighteen of its twenty verses, which constitute a veritable handbook of acceptable (and unacceptable) practices during times of warfare. Those verses have been the source of much debate, apparently even within the Hebrew Bible itself.

[33] Our interest is in the last two verses, a veritable gem of ecological insight under circumstances in which concern for fruit-bearing trees would seem to occupy at best the nethermost realms of human consciousness. Of course, that is probably the reason for their placement at exactly this point in the biblical text.

[34] As can be observed from even a cursory examination of the last part of verse 19, there is considerable uncertainty as to the precise details of the image being painted. There is, however, no question (in spite of the wording in the King James Version) that these trees are compared, and compared rather favorably, to humans. It is important, as most translators recognize, to keep this comparison in full view of readers. The best way to do this is to use the term “human” or, in my opinion, even better “human beings.” Through such imagery, kept as vital in English renderings as it is alive in the Hebrew, we see at once the virtual equation of humans with the rest of nature and the recognition that, after all, nature is in many respects subservient to the needs of people (non-fruit-bearing trees are afforded no protection since their sole purpose appears to be providing protection – or, more precisely, offensive material – while humans go about the business of destroying each other). As noted at the beginning of this article, it is sometimes difficult (or even close to impossible) to fully comprehend some biblical passages. Verse 19 contains such a phrase. However, even if we cannot be entirely certain of its meaning, the image of trees as human beings is clear. With that in mind, readers can evaluate which of the following renderings paints the most arresting picture of this striking image.

King James Version

¹⁹When thou shalt besiege a city a long time, in making war against it to take it, thou shalt not destroy the trees thereof by forcing an axe against them: for thou mayest eat of them, and thou shalt not cut them down (for the tree of the field is man’s life) to employ them in the siege: ²⁰Only the trees which thou knowest that they be not trees for meat, thou shalt destroy and cut

them down; and thou shalt build bulwarks against the city that maketh war with thee, until it be subdued.

New American Standard Bible

¶¹⁹When you besiege a city a long time, to make war against it in order to capture it, you shall not destroy its trees by swinging an axe against them; for you may eat from them, and you shall not cut them down. For is the tree of the field a man, that it should be besieged by you? ²⁰Only the trees which you know are not fruit trees you shall destroy and cut down, that you may construct siegeworks against the city that is making war with you until it falls.

New Revised Standard Version

¶¹⁹If you besiege a town for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you must not destroy its trees by wielding an ax against them. Although you may take food from them, you must not cut them down. Are trees in the field human beings that they should come under siege from you? ²⁰You may destroy only the trees that you know do not produce food; you may cut them down for use in building siegeworks against the town that makes war with you, until it falls.

New International Version

¶¹⁹When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, do not destroy its trees by putting an ax to them, because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. Are the trees of the field people, that you should besiege them? ²⁰However, you may cut down trees that you know are not fruit trees and use them to build siege works until the city at war with you falls.

Contemporary English Version

¶¹⁹When you are attacking a town, don't chop down its fruit trees, not even if you have had the town surrounded for a long time. Fruit trees aren't your enemies, and they produce food that you can eat, so don't cut them down. ²⁰You may need wood to make ladders and towers to help you get over the walls and capture the town. But use only trees that you know are not fruit trees.

Jewish Publication Society Tanakh

¶¹⁹When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city? ²⁰Only trees that you know do not yield food may be destroyed; you may cut them down for constructing siegeworks against the city that is waging war on you, until it has been reduced.

New Living Translation

¶¹⁹When you are besieging a town and the war drags on, do not destroy the trees. Eat the fruit, but do not cut down the trees. They are not enemies that need to be attacked! ²⁰But you may cut down trees that you know are not valuable for food. Use them to make the equipment you need to besiege the town until it falls.

The Message

¶¹⁹When you mount an attack on a town and the siege goes on a long time, don't start cutting down the trees, swinging your axes against them. Those trees are your future food; don't cut them down. Are trees soldiers who come against you with weapons? ²⁰The exception can be those trees which don't produce food; you can chop them down and use the timbers to build siege engines against the town that is resisting you until it falls.

Alter, The Five Books of Moses

¹⁹Should you besiege a town many days to do battle against it, you shall not destroy its trees to swing and axe against them, for from them you shall eat, and you shall not cut them down. For is the tree of the field a human, to come away from you in the siege? ²⁰Only a tree that you know is not a tree for eating, it you know destroy and cut down and build a siege-work against the town that does battle against you, until its fall.

Friedman, Commentary on the Torah

¹⁹When you'll besiege a city many days, fighting against it to capture it, you shall not destroy a tree of it, moving an axe at it, because you'll eat from it, so you shall not cut it down; because is a tree of the field a human, to go from in front of you in a siege?! ²⁰Only a tree that you'll know that it isn't a tree for eating; that one you may destroy and cut down so you may build a siegework against the city that is making war with you until its fall.

Hosea 2:18 (2:20 in Some Versions)

[35] Thus far, all of the passages examined come from the Torah or Pentateuch. There are good reasons, practical and otherwise, for this circumstance. First, we note that, with the exception of the Jewish Publication Society Tanakh version, none of the Jewish versions here goes beyond the Pentateuch. This points, of course, to the central role the Torah plays, and so far as we know has always played, in the life of the Jewish community. Because of that it is not surprising to find that so many passages dealing with the environment, as with other topics of importance, are found within the pages of these five books.

[36] We would, however, be remiss if we did not analyze at least one passage from the Prophets and one from the Writings (the two other divisions of the Hebrew Bible). It is to this task that we now turn.

[37] In selecting Hosea 2:18 (2:20) as our example from the Prophets, we are excluding other possible choices such as Isaiah 11. Although a section like Isaiah 11 is exceedingly rich in its

detailed depiction of nature – in this case, a natural world in which even “natural” enemies come together in harmony – it does not easily yield specific differences in contemporary translations for us to analyze.

[38] In a sense, this is also the case for Hosea 2. For the most part, modern versions retain the technical language of the Hebrew in speaking of “making [literally, cutting] a covenant.” Those versions that, for whatever reason, use some other term deprive readers of what is in fact an extraordinary statement: a covenant (the same Hebrew word, *brt* [ברת]) describes the agreements made between God and Israel) is made between God and the animals – described here in language that recalls the creation in Genesis as well as the dietary laws of Leviticus 11.

[39] This new covenant is made on behalf of Israel (“for them”; the New Revised Standard Version’s “for you” is a change, without textual warrant, to bring this verse in line with the second person of the immediate context). Thus, we once again see both the dignity that is ascribed even to the “creeping things” (in that they will be “covenant partners” with God) and the relative superiority of humans to “the beasts . . . the birds . . . and the creeping things” (the covenant is, after, for the sake of Israel).

[40] There is one further point to note. Almost all translations speak of “banishing” “abolishing” or “removing” “bow, sword, and war” from the land. The Hebrew root here, *šbr* (שבר), literally means, “to break,” as in the King James Version and a few other later versions (and also as noted in the Jewish Publication Society Tanakh notes). I suspect that the reluctance to make use of the literal term here is due to the perception that, although we can easily imagine “breaking” a bow or sword, it is odd to speak of “breaking” war. But this is as true in Hebrew as it is in English. The choice of this verb in Hebrew should be considered intentional; even if we are uncertain as to the exact impact it would have had in antiquity, we should retain it in English – perhaps causing an attentive reader to stop and consider what is being said.

[41] With that in mind, we are led to observe that the final “them” of this verse, in Hebrew a pronominal suffix to the verb, is ambiguous. It is natural to take it as a reference to humans (“them” earlier in the verse); this is what the New Living Translation does explicitly by the change (unwarranted by the text) of “them” to “you,” clearly addressed to Israel. However, it may well be that here, in a context of future peace (hence, the Message’s “peace treaty” and the Contemporary English Version’s “live in peace” at the beginning of the verse, although objectionable on other grounds, do make this point clearly), “them” is inclusive of all living beings. If this is so, Hosea has actually gone beyond the vision of Isaiah 7 – where leopards and young goats (but so far as we know, not humans) will lie down together without harm to anyone or anything. The general meaning of this prophetic verse is not in doubt. However, its full signification lies, I believe, in careful word choices, such as “covenant,” “break,” and (the retention of) “them.” The *King James Version*, in this instance, set a laudable path, and it is interesting to compare those versions that followed it with those that have not.

King James Version

¹⁸And in that day will I make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field,
and with the fowls of heaven, and with the creeping things of the ground:

and I will break the bow and the sword and the battle out of the earth, and will make them to lie down safely.

New American Standard Bible

¹⁸In that day I will also make a covenant for them, With the beasts of the field, The birds of the sky, And the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, And will make them lie down in safety.

New Revised Standard Version

¹⁸I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety.

New American Bible

²⁰I will make a covenant for them on that day, with the beasts of the field, With the birds of the air, and with the things that crawl on the ground. Bow and sword and war I will destroy from the land, and I will let them take their rest in security.

New Jerusalem Bible

¶ ²⁰When that day comes I shall make a treaty for them with the wild animals, with the birds of heaven and the creeping things of the earth; I shall break the bow and the sword and warfare, and banish them from the country, and I will let them sleep secure.

New Living Translation

¹⁸At that time I will make a covenant with all the wild animals and the birds and the animals that scurry along the ground so that they will not harm you. I will remove all weapons of war from the land, all swords and bows, so you can live unafraid in peace and safety.

Psalm 8

[42] From the Writings, I have selected Psalm 8, which I have reproduced in full from various versions. In large part, this Psalm, like other biblical materials (see, especially, the lengthy Psalm 104 and several chapters in the latter part of the book of Job), extols the Lord as creator of an astonishingly diverse universe. The middle verses (5 and 6) raise the question of human's status in the created order, a query that, as we have seen, arises in other contexts as well. In its classical (that is, King James Version) English formulation, it begins, "What is man, that thou are mindful of him?" Although it would be fascinating to follow the rewording of this passage to take into account issues of gender, that is another topic for another paper.

[43] Here we focus on verse 6 (verse 7 in some versions). The root that is most often translated with "dominion" or "rule" is not the same as that found in Genesis 1; rather, in Psalm 8 the root *mšl* (משל) is used. There are actually two roots with these same three

consonants. One, from which the Hebrew name for the Book of Proverbs is derived, means (something like), “to compare, compose comparisons.” The other, which is present here, does connote “mastery” or “rule,” but generally without any suggestion of force or violence. With that in mind, it is worth seriously considering the rendering “put in charge,” found in the New Living Translation and the Message (which, it should be noted, are not closely related translations in terms of sponsorship or general approach). It seems, at least to me, that this phrase keeps the hierarchical structure in place while not introducing elements of malevolence that other English terms could suggest.

[44] The second line of verse 7 speaks of putting something (or things) “under” the feet of humans. The Hebrew preposition here, *tht* (תחת) does indeed most often mean “under,” which would accord with the idea of tight, if not total, human control over the works/handiworks of God. But, as noted above, such control may well not be envisioned. As I see it, the use of “at,” as in the New American Bible and the Jewish Publication Society Tanakh, as well as the periphrastic rendering of the New Living Translation, points in this direction. Laying something “at” a person’s feet is an act often associated with a gift; it acknowledges that the recipient is in charge, but lacks the “crushing” imagery of putting something “under” another person’s feet. And, in my view, this change in the rendering of a simple preposition accords with what the Psalmist intended.

[45] This final passage, from Psalm 8, brings us back full circle, as it were, to our first example from Genesis 1. English renderings of verse 6 offer two contrasting views: humans are to exercise dominion over the (other) works of God’s hands, all of which humans can crash with their feet; or, humans can deal respectfully and responsibly with the rest of nature, which God offers to humans “at” their feet. Only readers who have access to a variety of versions, as presented here, are enabled to come face-to-face with these differing perspectives and to make an informed choice between them.

King James Version

To the chief Musician upon Gittith, A Psalm of David.

¹O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! who hast set thy glory above the heavens.

²Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger.

³When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained;

⁴What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?

⁵For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour.

⁶Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet:

⁷All sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field;

⁸The fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas.

⁹O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!

New Revised Standard Version

¶ To the leader: according to The Gittith. A Psalm of David.

¹O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

¶ You have set your glory above the heavens.
²Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.

¶ ³When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
⁴what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

¶ ⁵Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.
⁶You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
⁷all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
⁸the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

¶ ⁹O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

New American Bible

¹For the leader; "upon the gittith." A psalm of David.

²O LORD, our Lord, how awesome is your name through all the earth! You
have set your majesty above the heavens!

³Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have drawn a defense against
your foes, to silence enemy and avenger.

⁴When I see your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars that
you set in place –

⁵What are humans that you are mindful of them, mere mortals that you care
for them?

⁶Yet you have made them little less than a god, crowned them with glory and
honor.

⁷You have given them rule over the works of your hands, put all things at
their feet:

⁸All sheep and oxen, even the beasts of the field,

⁹The birds of the air, the fish of the sea, and whatever swims the paths of the
seas.

¹⁰O LORD, our Lord, how awesome is your name through all the earth!

Contemporary English Version

¶ [A psalm by David for the music leader]

¶¹Our LORD and Ruler,
your name is wonderful
everywhere on earth!

You let your glory be seen
in the heavens above.

²With praises from children
and from tiny infants,
you have built a fortress.

It makes your enemies silent,
and all who turn against you
are left speechless.

¶³I often think of the heavens
your hands have made,
and of the moon and stars
you put in place.

⁴Then I ask, “Why do you care
about us humans?

Why are you concerned
for us weaklings?”

⁵You made us a little lower
than you yourself,
and you have crowned us
with glory and honor.

¶⁶You let us rule everything
your hands have made.
And you put all of it
under our power –

¶⁷the sheep and the cattle,
and every wild animal,
⁸the birds in the sky,
the fish in the sea,
and all ocean creatures.

¶⁹Our LORD and Ruler,
your name is wonderful
everywhere on earth!

Jewish Publication Society Tanakh

¶¹For the leader; on the gittith. A psalm of David.

¶²O LORD, our Lord, How majestic is Your name throughout the earth,
You who have covered the heavens with Your splendor!

³From the mouths of infants and sucklings You have founded strength on
account of Your foes, to put an end to enemy and avenger.
⁴When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and stars
that You set in place,
⁵what is man that You have been mindful of him, mortal man that You have
taken note of him,
⁶that You have made him little less than divine, and adorned him with glory
and majesty;
⁷You have made him master over Your handiwork, laying the world at his
feet,
⁸sheep and oxen, all of them, and wild beasts, too;
⁹the birds of the heavens, the fish of the sea, whatever travels the paths of
the seas.
¹⁰O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is Your name throughout the earth!

New Living Translation

¶ For the choir director: A psalm of David, to be accompanied by a stringed instrument.

¶ ¹O LORD, our Lord, the majesty of your name fills the earth!
Your glory is higher than the heavens.

¶ ²You have taught children and nursing infants
to give you praise.
They silence your enemies
who were seeking revenge.

¶ ³When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers –
the moon and the stars you have set in place –
⁴what are mortals that you should think of us,
mere humans that you should care for us?
⁵For you made us only a little lower than God,
and you crowned us with glory and honor.
⁶You put us in charge of everything you made,
giving us authority over all things –
⁷the sheep and the cattle
and all the wild animals,
⁸the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea,
and everything that swims the ocean currents.

¶ ⁹O LORD, our Lord, the majesty of your name fills the earth!

Conclusion

[46] In its broadest contours, I hope that this article has brought to the reader's awareness the vast array of Bible versions available to today's English-language audience. If we had included even more versions for each example, two aspects of this huge market would be absolutely clear (I hope that sufficient versions were cited in this article to make the point):

There is considerable variation in rendering the biblical text as we move from the literal to the free ends of what I call the translation “continuum.” So extensive are the variations in some passages that it is difficult to accept that translators are working with the same Hebrew. At the same time, there is much that many (often most) translations hold in common. Such commonality demonstrates the strength of tradition even in an age of innovation like ours.

[47] Personally, I like the idea of choice, and I am not daunted by the admittedly sometimes confusing selections offered at large book stores – if, for no other reason, because it forces the reader to consider what factors lead translators (generally organized as committees) to craft the text they do.

[48] For the specific purposes of this paper, we have focused on only a few of the factors that make up the context or environment in which translators operate. Interestingly enough, as I review my own preferences, I find myself “siding” as often with a freer translation as with a more literal rendering. As I wrote earlier in my comments above, I am no longer bound by any one theory – or practice – of translation (in my younger days, I scorned all but the literal versions).

[49] At the least, I trust that readers will now stop to listen cautiously and critically whenever they hear a phrase such as, “The Bible says . . .” or “. . . is in the Bible.” As we have seen, the Bible “says” (or rather, the authors of the Bible “say”) many things. Even with (or perhaps, because of) this lack of unanimity among the traditions embedded in our Hebrew Bible, we can sense an agreement that nature (or better, the rest of nature) should continually elicit a sense of awe from humans beings, that humans do have a hierarchical responsibility to care for the myriad animals we encounter and lands we inhabit, and that the care we bestow upon the rest of nature makes up an important component of the divine “image” in human beings, a component that we can imperfectly, but resolutely, build upon in helping to bring out its perfection in the time-to-come.

[50] Its word and our world are far too important to leave to others or to chance how we find our way in today’s society. For surely, if we do need give heed to the authentic message and teachings of the biblical text, there will no tomorrow worthy of bequeathing to our children and theirs.

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