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# With a Cloven Tongue: Hebrew Double Readings and Donne's "The Lamentations of Jeremy, for the Most Part According to Tremellius"

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"It must always . . . seem odd," writes nineteenth-century critic George Saintsbury, "that such a poet as Donne should have taken the trouble to tag the *Lamentations* of Jeremiah into verse, which is sometimes much more lamentable in form than even in matter."[1] Saintsbury's critique of Donne's *The Lamentations of Jeremy, for the Most Part According to Tremellius* is kinder than many other assessments: K. W. Gransden describes the poem as "for the most part unreadable," while Frank Kermode bestows upon it only a single, damning sentence, "the *Lamentations of Jeremy* are not very interesting."[2]

Saintsbury's criticism does more, however, than anticipate the relative neglect of the poem by twentieth-century critics; his division of the chief features of the poem into its *form* and its *matter* reflects Donne's own assessment of the key elements involved in verse translation. In "Upon The Translation Of The Psalmes By Sir Philip Sidney, And The Countesse Of Pembroke his Sister," Donne praises their ability to re-create the "cloven tongue" of the Holy Spirit and

[1]*Prefaces and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1933), p. 286.

[2]Gransden, *John Donne*, revised edition (Hamden, Conn: Archon Books, 1969), p. 147; Kermode, *English Renaissance Literature: Introductory Lectures*, ed. Kermode, Stephen Fender, and Kenneth Palmer (London: Grey-Mills, 1974), p. 95.

the "double power by which he sung / The highest matter in the noblest forme."[3] Donne again stresses these paired concerns of form and matter in a letter most likely sent to Henry Goodere, explaining that "I Send you here a Translation . . . whether the gravity of the matter, or the Poeticall form, give it his inclination, and *principium motus.*"[4] Prose translations might seek (to borrow Miles Smith's phrase in the preface to the *King James Bible*) to "break . . . the shell" of the Bible's language "that we may eat the kernel" of its meaning,[5] but translating the Bible into verse required, for Donne, attention to the features of language as well as content. The style of the Holy Ghost both surpasses and *demands* human literary composition, for as Donne preaches in a 1627 St Paul's sermon on Exodus 4:13, "there are not so eloquent Bookes in the world, as the Scriptures; neither should a man come to any kinde of handling of them with uncircumcised lips."[6] If the Bible contains and perfects every aspect of eloquence, then a worthy verse paraphrase of the Bible must re-create some part of that eloquence.

Studies of Donne's *The Lamentations of Jeremy* to date have focused exclusively on the matter of the poem, under various guises: why Donne chose *Lamentations*, and which versions he follows. John Klause, William B. Hunter, and Robin Robbins attempt to date the poem more accurately by associating Donne's choice of *Lamentations* with a specific life or political event; such readings are unconvincing, as *Lamentations*' generalized expressions of suffering can easily be accommodated to most situations.[7] Raymond-Jean Frontain more

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[3]John T. Shawcross, *The Complete Poetry of John Donne* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1967), pp. 388–90, ll. 9–11.

[4]*Letters to Severall Persons of Honour* (London: J. Flesher for Richard Marriot, 1651), p. 207.

[5]"The Translators to the Reader," in *The Holy Bible* [*King James Bible*] (London: Robert Barker, 1611; STC 2216), fols. A3$^{v}$–B2$^{v}$, fol. A4$^{v}$.

[6]George Potter and Evelyn Simpson, eds. *The Sermons of John Donne* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–62), vol. 8, p. 147. Parenthetical references to this work will be by volume and page number.

[7]Klause, "The Two Occasions of Donne's Lamentations of Jeremy," *Modern Philology* 90 (1993): 337–59; Hunter, "An Occasion for John Donne's 'The Lamentations of Jeremy,' *ANQ* 12.3 (1999): 18–23; and Robbins, *Donne:*

compellingly argues that Donne's interest in the book stems from his general poetic imagination.[8] In determining which biblical version Donne worked from, Graham Roebuck provides a convincing case for the Tremellius-Junius Latin translation of the Hebrew Bible (the version Donne identifies in the title) and the *Geneva Bible*, arguing that echoes of the *Vulgate*, the *King James Bible*, and other translations stem from the general similarity between versions, and that Donne's affinity to other versions must be proven over and above Tremellius and the *Geneva Bible*.[9] On this basis, Ted-Larry Pebworth's claim that Donne borrows from the 1587 paraphrase of Christopher Fetherstone and "Fetherstone's Friend" is not convincing, as the similarities between "Fetherstone's Friend" and Donne can be traced to their shared dependence on the *Geneva* version.[10]

The poetic form of the work, on the other hand, has been woefully neglected,[11] most likely because it is hard to determine where, beyond deviation from source texts and choice of meter, "poeticall form" is to be found in a biblical verse translation. Donne's relatively close paraphrase leads many to assume that he "surrenders to his source,

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*The Complete Poems of John Donne*, revised edition (Longmans 2010), pp. 587–89.

[8]"'The Man which have Affliction Seene': Donne, Jeremiah, and the Fashioning of Lamentation," in *Centered on the Word: Literature, Scripture, and the Tudor-Stuart Middle Way*, ed. Daniel W. Dorksen and Christopher Hodgkins (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), pp. 127–47.

[9]"Donne's *Lamentations of Jeremy* Reconsidered," *John Donne Journal* 10 (1991): 37–44. Roebuck builds upon arguments made by John Pollock, "Donne's 'Lamentations of Jeremy' and the Geneva Bible," *English Studies* 55 (1974): 513–15.

[10]"John Donne's 'Lamentations' and Christopher Fetherstone's *Lamentations . . . in Prose and Meeter (1587)*," in *Wrestling with God: Literature and Theology in the English Renaissance: Essays to Honour Paul Grant Stanwood*, ed. Mary Ellen Henley and W. Speed Hill with R. G. Siemens ([Vancouver]: M. E. Henley, 2001), pp. 85–98.

[11]As an exception, Frontain's "Man which have Affliction Seene" explores how *Lamentations* is aligned with many of Donne's concerns in his other poetic works, and how it appealed to his literary aesthetic. Frontain does not, however, particularly explore how Donne's *The Lamentations of Jeremy* over and above the book of *Lamentations* upholds those concerns and aesthetics.

forswearing his usual deviousness, drama, and self-conscious wit."[12] But Donne's adherence to source texts by no means presupposes a loss of his own poetic voice; rather, his linguistic choices in *The Lamentations of Jeremy* demonstrate a sustained and intensive mapping of his own poetic interests alongside close attention to the poetic fabric of the Bible. Critics alternatively tend to locate verse translators' poetic voice in their use of meter. While early modern attempts to reconcile Hebrew prosody (so far as it was understood) and Western quantitative verse forms provide ample scope in Psalm culture, Donne's consistent use of four-line iambic pentameter in *The Lamentations of Jeremy* does not provide much material. Donne does not experiment with meters or attempt to recreate the multiple acrostics present in the Hebrew original of *Lamentations*, nor does he appear to have engaged much with questions of Hebrew prosody generally, other than to say (following contemporary experts) that parts of the Hebrew Bible were indeed written "in a musical, in a metrical, in a measured composition, in verse" (*Sermons* 2:171).

Rather, when Donne discusses the Bible's literary form, he tends to focus on its "delicacy, and harmony, and melody of language" (*Sermons* 6:55), on its tropes, its figures, its wit—in essence, what it shares with his own poetic language. Donne's use of language in *The Lamentations of Jeremy* reflects a sustained attempt to mimic an aspect of Hebrew that he explores across his prose works, and that adds deeper resonance to his sense of the *cloven tongue* of the Holy Spirit in the original. Donne repeatedly describes the language of the Hebrew Bible as particularly prone to *double readings*, to linguistic forms which are overflowing with manifold—at times irreconcilable—meanings. *The Lamentations of*

[12]Klause, "Two Occasions," p. 337. Whether Donne's is a "close" or a "free" translation is best summarised by Roebuck, who says "where it translates Tremellius, it is a translation; where it paraphrases the Geneva Bible, it is a paraphrase, and in both cases there are passages in which Donne expands somewhat his sources with a modicum of poetic license" ("*Lamentations of Jeremy* Reconsidered," pp. 41–42). If the point of comparison is a translation like the *King James Bible*, then Donne's *Lamentations of Jeremy* is, of course, free; compared to other verse translations such as that of "Fetherstone's Friend," Donne deviates from his sources relatively little, using between half and a quarter as many lines to express each Biblical verse.

*Jeremy* attempts to incorporate this doubleness, prioritizing words and phrases that allow puns, contradictions, and semantic ambivalence.

## The Cloven Tongues of the Holy Ghost: The Double Sense of Hebrew

In a sermon preached to the Countess of Bedford, at Harrington House on January 7, 1620, Donne says of the Hebrew of his text Job 13:15 that "no phrase, no style, [is] more ambiguous . . . very many words [are] so expressed, very many phrases so conceived, as that they admit a diverse, a *contrary* sense" (*Sermons* 3:189). He returns to this doubleness in many of his sermons: he describes the Holy Spirit's expression "in a word, of a double, and very diverse signification" (*Sermons* 9:98) in a 1629 Whitsunday sermon preached at St Paul's on Genesis 1:2; he argues in an undated Whitsunday sermon on Acts 10:44 (likely preached at Lincoln's Inn) that "in that language in which God spoke, the Hebrew, the same roote will take in words of a contrary signification" (*Sermons* 5:51); and in his 1626 Gunpowder Plot sermon preached at St Paul's on Psalm 64:10, he claims that "Hebrew words have often such a transplantation" such that single words can hold different meanings across the Bible—as, for example, *Halal*, which he explains can be translated as *joy*, *glory*, *praise*, or equally *ingloriousness*, and *contempt*, and *dejection of spirit* (*Sermons* 7:253).[13]

Donne is perennially alive to the profuse semantic potential of single words, and he frequently plays on dual meanings and homophones in English. But in his discussions of Hebrew, Donne's sense of the language as inherently disposed toward semantic multivalence and "words of a contrary signification" exceeds his general attentiveness to the manifold meanings of words. As he explains in *Essayes in Divinity*, the literal sense of the Bible is not identical to that "which the letter seems to present"; rather, it is "that which the Holy Ghost doth in that place principally intend," an intention which might be singular or multi-layered, and in which

[13]Donne also refers to double meanings of Hebrew words in a sermon on the Penitential Psalms (on Ps. 32:7, *Sermons* 9:334–49) and in a sermon on Ezekiel 34:19 (*Sermons* 10:159–77).

seemingly "diverse literall senses" co-exist as one abundant expression of the Holy Ghost.[14]

Recent scholarship has begun to explore early modern frustrations with the multifaceted meaning of scripture. Theodor Dunkelgrün, for instance, has explored the clash of the Bible's multiple textual traditions in the making of the Antwerp Polyglot.[15] Anthony Ossa-Richardson similarly outlines early modern approaches to the existence of multiple meanings in texts. Chanita Goodblatt explores Donne's tendency to hold double meanings in tension, arguing for his tendency to harness multiple secondary sources in order to allow that tension.[16] It is perhaps due to his interactions with Hebrew via such secondary sources that Donne constructs his vision of Hebrew doubleness; early modern discussions of Hebrew as prone to double and contrasting meanings seem especially prevalent in vernacular texts, as critics who could read some Hebrew, but who worked primarily through Latin intermediaries, attempt to work through features of Hebrew that were not fully understood even by expert Hebraist scholars.[17] Donne's view of a generalized tendency to double readings in the Hebrew Bible arises from his conflation of several features of the text. Broadly, those features are: the existence of marginal corrections; cognate roots; and Hebrew's economical vocabulary.

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[14]*John Donne: Essayes in Divinity*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), p. 46.

[15]*The Multiplicity Of Scripture: The Confluence Of Textual Traditions In The Making Of The Antwerp Polyglot Bible (1568–1573)*. PhD Diss, University of Chicago, 2012.

[16]Ossa-Richardson, *A History of Ambiguity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming); see also his "The Naked Truth of Scripture: André Rivet between Bellarmine and Grotius," in *God's Word Questioned: Biblical Criticism and Scriptural Authority in the Dutch Golden Age*, ed. Dirk van Miert, Henk Nellen, Piet Steenbakkers and Jetze Touber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming) (I am grateful to Anthony for allowing me to read a draft version while preparing this essay); Goodblatt, *The Christian Hebraism of John Donne: Written with the Fingers of Man's Hand* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010).

[17]For a more thorough analysis of Donne's status as a Hebraist and the use of such Latin intermediary texts in England, see Goodblatt, *Christian Hebraism*.

Donne discusses the first of these features, marginal readings, in his 1620 Easter sermon preached to the Countess of Bedford. He explains that:

> for such an ambiguity, in an *intire sentence*, the words of this text are a pregnant, and evident example, for they may be directly, and properly thus rendered out of the Hebrew, *Behold he will kill me, I will not hope*; and this seemes to differ much from our reading, *Behold, though he kill me, yet will I trust in him.* (*Sermons* 3:189)

The diametric possible translations of Job 13:15, *Behold he will kill me, I will not hope* and *Behold, though he kill me, yet will I trust in him* stem from a marginal correction of the Hebrew text in the scribal apparatus to the Hebrew Bible known as the *Masorah*. Hebrew scribes considered the text of scripture to be too sacred to emend, even in the face of apparently obvious errors; corrected readings were instead written in the margin, and anyone reading from the Hebrew Bible would know to replace the text reading with the marginal emendation, if indeed a change of pronunciation was necessary—many such marginal readings address variant spellings of homophones. In the example Donne cites, the error derives from the two homophones "*lo*," respectively meaning "not" and "to him." The text reads "he will kill me, I will **not** hope," which the margin corrects to "he will kill me, I will hope **in him**," translated by most early modern English versions as "*though* he kills me, *yet* I will trust in him."[18]

This sort of doubly meaningful reading occasionally made possible by marginal corrections led early modern Jewish as well as Christian biblical scholars to react against the implication that marginal readings were solely intended to address errors. The Catholic editor of the *Douay-Rheims Bible*, Gregory Martin, claims this understanding of marginal readings allows Protestants to change scriptural text at will, for they will argue that "whatsoeuer pleaseth not him, crept out of the margent into the text."[19] For Martin, the mere existence of marginal

[18]This reading, with slight variations, is given in the *Great Bible, the Geneva Bible*, the *Bishops Bible*, the *King James Bible*, and the *Douay-Rheims Bible*.

[19]*A Discouerie of the Manifold Corruptions of the Holy Scriptures by the Heretikes of our Daies* (Rheims: John Fogny, 1582), fol. avi$^{r}$.

corrections proves the unreliability of the original Hebrew biblical text and argues for the Vulgate textual tradition. For Protestants like Hugh Broughton, however, reaction against any suggestion that the Hebrew text has been or requires emendation leads to a tendency to argue for the dually meaningful nature of the marginal readings—that is, "alwayes the text word is exact, and the margent warneth of some matter profitable for the depth of Ebrew skill, or helpeth in a doubtfull phrase . . . both the text is exact, and the margent profitable."[20] Donne avoids the polemical minefield of competing textual traditions and potential textual correction in his treatment of these ambivalent dual readings; he makes no mention of the Hebrew marginalia, and instead frames the readings as a conflict between the original and a "true reading" of it, arguing for integrating both senses by the inclusion of a question mark. He claims that:

> reading it with an *Interrogation*, the Originall, and our translation will constitute one and the same thing; It will be all one sense to say, with the Originall, *Behold he will kill me*, (that is, let him kill me) *yet shall not I hope in him?* and to say with our translation, *Behold though he kill me, yet will I hope in him*.[21]

Donne is careful not to indicate that the original text reading is incorrect—rather, both meanings coexist in what he calls "truely the true sense of the place" (*Sermons* 3:189), a sense in which contrary modes of expression in fact offer a single message.

A variety of features of biblical Hebrew contribute to perceptions of doubleness at the level of individual words. Early modern commentators tend to term such words, concordance-like, as "Hebrew words of a double/diverse signification"—a commonplace phrase in sermons, religious polemic, and scriptural commentaries which covers all manner of Hebrew linguistic ambiguity. For example, in the list of directions given to the translators of the *King James Bible*, the fourth

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[20]*An Aduertisement of Corruption in our Handling of Religion* ([Middelburg: Richard Schilders], 1604), fol. A3$^{v}$.

[21]*Sermons* 3:189. This was a common treatment of this particular verse; see, for example, Hugh Broughton, *Iob to the King* ([Amsterdam: Giles Thorp], 1610), p. 29.

rule reads "when a word hath diverse significations, that to be kept which hath been most commonly used by the most of the Ancient Fathers."[22] A marginal note in the *Bishop's Bible* for the sixth chapter of *Leviticus* reads "This is diuersly expounded, because ye Hebrue worde hath a double signification."[23] Jean Calvin, in his sermons on Job, explains that "the Hebrue word [*deber*] whych is put heere for talke or speech, is sometimes taken also for *a thing*," claiming that "as well the one as the other maye bee spoken, bycause the Hebrue word hath a double signification."[24] For translator of the *Douay-Rheims Bible* Gregory Martin, differences between Catholic and Protestant scriptural interpretations are the result of "ambiguous Hebrue words of doubtful signification."[25]

For Catholic polemicist William Rainolds, ambiguity stems from Hebrew's economical vocabulary, for, "their tonge hauing in it no great store of words, euery word almost is vsed in verie diuers significations."[26] The Protestant clergyman and scholar Henry Ainsworth explains that because Hebrew is the original language, it does not have the same proliferations of words as other languages.[27] Hence a single word like *halal*, as Donne explains, can cover many shades of meaning:

> *Halal*, that is here translated *Ioy*, and *Glory*, and *Praise*, in divers places of Scripture, (as Hebrew words have often such a transplantation) signifies *Ingloriousnesse*, and *contempt*, and *dejection of spirit*; so that Ingloriousnesse, and contempt, and dejection of spirit, may be a part of the retribution; God may make Ingloriousnesse, and Contempt, and Dejection of spirit, a greater blessing and benefit, then Joy, and Glory, and Praise would have been. (*Sermons* 7:253)

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[22]David Norton, *A Textual History of the King James Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 8.

[23]*The Holie Bible* [*The Bishops' Bible*], ed. by Matthew Parker, trans. by Parker *et al.* (London: Richard Jugge, 1568; STC 2099), p. lxv.

[24]*Sermons of Master Iohn Caluin, vpon the booke of Iob*, trans. by Arthur Golding (London: [Henry Bynneman for] Lucas Harison and George Byshop, 1574), p. 69.

[25]*A Discouerie of the Manifold Corruptions of the Holy Scriptures*, p. 18.

[26]*A Refutation of Sundry Reprehensions, Cauils, and False Sleightes* (Paris: [For Richard Verstegan?], 1583), p. 432.

[27]*The Art of Logick*, 2nd Edition (London: John Streater, 1657), p. 77.

Not only does the word cover several English words, it enfolds their antonyms into itself as part of the Bible's larger redemptive pattern. Donne does not here mention, as he does in his St Paul's sermon on John 10:10, that *halal* can also mean "*Insanire, To fall mad*" (*Sermons* 9:152), because his purpose here is to show the interrelated plenitude of the word's ambivalence.

In this example, Donne cites the word "*halal*" in its root form, which is his usual practice in discussing points of Hebrew grammar. The multiple meanings here arise from the way Hebrew verbs are formed; verbs are declined by altering the (usually) three-letter root, with the seven common conjugations (called *binyanim*) offering new shades of meaning. Hebrew lexicons (in Donne's day as now) typically group the various definitions of words occurring in the Bible under their root form—indeed, the foremost Hebrew lexicon of the Medieval and early modern period, that of 12th century French Rabbi and Scholar David Kimhi, is titled *Sefer ha-Shorashim* (*Book of the Roots*). On rare occasions, Donne discusses the specific *binyan* used in words he is discussing, but he does not appear to fully understand how they work, and instead appropriates the definitions given in contemporary lexicons. For example, in his discussion of Psalm 38:2, he explains that "that word, in which the Prophet here expresses this sticking, and this fast sticking of these arrows, which is *Nachath*, is here, (as the Grammarians in that language call it) in *Niphal, figere facta,* they were made to stick" (*Sermons* 2:67). The root "*naḥat*," which contemporary lexicons concur in defining as "to descend," means in the passive *nif'al* conjugation, "come down on," as indeed it is defined in Johannes Buxtorf's *Lexicon hebraicum et chaldaicum* and Sanctes Pagninus's *Thesaurus Linguae Sanctae* (itself a Latin version of Kimhi's *Sefer ha-shorashim*). Buxtorf, however, further defines the *nif'al* form of the word specifically as given in Psalm 38:2 as "*descendere facta*, *demissae*, *infixae sunt (in me)*," [are made to descend, are sent down, are stuck (into me)], in parallel with the Vulgate's "*infixae sunt in me*," and in reflection of the fact that the agents of the sentence are arrows.[28] Donne blends

[28]The *King James Bible* also adopts "sticking," with "thine arrows stick fast in me." Goodblatt discusses this passage in detail in terms of Donne's attention to the grammatical terms of divine violence, *Christian Hebraism*, p. 127 (passim), locating Donne's sense of God's responsibility for violence in

Buxtorf's *descendere facta* and replaces *infixae* with the related *figere*, and terms it the general grammatical meaning of *naḥat* in the *nif'al* form.

Perhaps because of this uncertainty with Hebrew verb forms, Donne typically ignores issues of conjugation and, as with *halal*, instead treats conjugated meanings as variant definitions of a single word. As was common practice among his contemporaries, this leads to a tendency to attribute ambiguity to shared roots as a sort of catch-all explanation for Hebrew ambiguity. For example, Donne argues that "in that language in which God spoke, the Hebrew, the same roote will take in words of a contrary signification, (as the word of *Iobs* wife signifies blessing and cursing too)" (*Sermons* 5:51). Here, the contrary possible meanings of the words of Job's wife in Job 2:9 ("Then saide his wife vnto him, Doest thou still reteine thine integritie? Curse God, and die") stem not from the various meanings of a single root, but from the use of a particular type of euphemism known by Donne and his contemporaries as *antiphrasis*: as preacher Joseph Caryl defines it, "the speaking of a thing sounding one way when it is meant another way, when there is an opposition betweene the letter of the word and the meaning of the word."[29] Hebrew scribes considered it too blasphemous to write "*ḳalal*" [curse] God, and thus wrote the opposite, "*barakh*" [bless] God, under the understanding that appropriate meaning could be determined from the context. In the context of Job's wife, however, "bless God, and die" and "curse god, and die," are equally meaningful; indeed, St Jerome retains *benedicas* in the Vulgate text. Donne believes that the uncertainty comes from contrariness of the word itself, and thus terms it an ambiguous root.

Given the blend of issues behind Donne's many descriptions of Hebrew ambiguity, it is unsurprising that he follows contemporary practice in preferring to refer generally to "word[s] of a double signification" (*Sermons* 9:348). This tendency to generalize the multiple Hebrew grammatical issues outlined above is not, ultimately, reflective of a lack of engagement with the features of the original text

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the passive form of the verb. My argument in this passage is aligned with her general focus on Donne's use of secondary sources, although she does not note Donne's appropriation of Buxtorf.

[29] *An Exposition with Practical Observations upon the Three First Chapters of the Book of Job* (London: G. Miller for Henry Overton, Luke Fawne, and John Rothwell, 1643), p. 73.

of the Bible; rather, Donne attempts in his prose works to bring to the forefront the general features of the Hebrew Bible's language and forms of expression. The original Hebrew, in Donne's prose works, is a language overflowing with meaning—unable, quite, to fit into single human words.

## "So Thou Hast Cleft That Spirit, to Perform That Work Again": Double Meanings in "The Lamentations of Jeremy"

In his verse translation, Donne demonstrates consistent attention to the way his language responds to the linguistic features of the Hebrew Bible—how his English words engage with and reflect the form of scripture's words. This engagement involves translation, certainly, but it also involves poetry; it is an exercise in specific word choice as well as attention to the general features of linguistic form at play in Hebrew and English. This attention does not mean Donne engages in a straightforward attempt in *The Lamentations of Jeremy* to replace doubly meaningful Hebrew words with equally ambivalent English ones—the languages seldom map onto each other in that way. Certainly, he demonstrates attention to specific moments of doubleness in the original text, and responds in his English, as will be explored below. But more frequently, Donne attempts to generalize the Hebrew tendency toward multivalence across his English version, in ways that are sometimes, but not always, equivalent to ambivalence in the original. Put simply, Donne's *The Lamentations of Jeremy* demonstrates remarkable double readings but not always in the same places or in the same ways as the original.

Donne's level of Hebrew knowledge when he composed *The Lamentations of Jeremy* is, of course, important in any consideration of how significantly his approaches to Hebrew double readings in his prose works can be brought to bear on his poetic work. From an internal perspective, Roebuck and Pollock have persuasively demonstrated that his chief sources are the Latin Tremellius-Junius Bible (as indeed Donne indicates in his title) and the *Geneva Bible*. However, as Goodblatt has outlined, working from intermediary sources of this type cannot be read as an indication of ignorance of Hebrew or preclude consultation with the original. Use of such intermediaries was common practice for Christian Hebraists, and

indeed, the choice of Tremellius's version is indicative of his interest in Hebrew for, as Donne claims in his 1620 sermon preached at Lincoln's Inn on Job 19:26, Tremellius "adheres most to the letter of the Hebrew" (*Sermons* 3:106) out of contemporary Latin versions. Furthermore, Donne engages with features of Hebrew that are not available in Tremellius or the *Geneva Bible*, as will be explored below. As Goodblatt explores in detail, attempts to concretely assess Donne's "level" of Hebrew knowledge (such as that of Simpson in *The Sermons of John Donne*) are rarely conclusive, as they do not tend to account for intermediaries or the complex forms of linguistic engagement Donne demonstrates in his prose works. As I argue in "Audience and Error: Translation, Philology, and Rhetoric in the Preaching of Lancelot Andrewes,"[30] they also do not account for Donne's accommodation of his audience's unfamiliarity with Hebrew grammar; auditors' notes of Andrewes's lectures on Genesis at St Paul's in the 1590s suggest that complex linguistic analysis of Hebrew in sermons could lead to confusion, while providing Hebrew in simplified forms (such as in the infinitive, Donne's usual method) was more likely to be correctly and clearly recorded. Goodblatt's description of Donne as a "third order Hebraist," following Matt Goldish's definition—that is, someone who "could read *some* Hebrew, but who knew and used significant amounts of Jewish literature in Latin and vernacular translation"[31]— is the most helpful definition, especially if opened up to allow occasional forays into more tangled grammatical issues and a tendency to theorise and generalise (sometimes incorrectly) about the workings of the language, as explored above.

Ultimately, the major problem involved in relating Donne's sense of Hebrew ambiguity as outlined in his prose works to *The Lamentations of Jeremy* is one of date. As Judith Scherer Herz argues, biographical sources suggest Donne engaged in the bulk of his study of Hebrew in

[30]*Labourers in the Vineyard of the Lord: Scholarship and the Making of the King James Version of the Bible*, ed. Mordechai Feingold. Leiden: Brill, 2018.

[31]Goldish, *Judaism in the Theology of Sir Issac Newton* (Dordrecht: Kluwer—International Archives of the History of Ideas, 1998), p. 18; Goodblatt, *Christian Hebraism*, p. 22 (see p. 22ff for a more detailed discussion of biographical attestations to Donne's study of Hebrew).

the years leading to his ordination (January 1615).[32] There is no critical consensus regarding a date of composition for the poem; estimated dates range from the late 1590s to the late 1620s. Attempts to date the poem by relating its content to some event in his life are, for the most part, unconvincing, for the *Lamentations'* expressions of suffering can, and indeed have been, brought to bear on almost any form of grief or calamity. A notable exception is Isaak Walton's claim in his life of Donne that, following the death of his wife in 1617, Donne "gave some ease to his oppressed heart by thus venting his sorrows: thus he began the day, and ended the night; ended the restless night and began the weary day in *lamentations*."[33] H. J. C. Grierson was inclined to believe that these "lamentations" refer to *The Lamentations of Jeremy* and thus dated the poem to 1617 in the absence of other information.[34] Suggestions that the poem was written in the 1620s appear to have originated with Helen Gardner, who tentatively suggests that he may have composed the poem in 1621, in response to the Sidneian *Psalms* and in an effort to improve church singing.[35] Roebuck's analysis of Donne's general adherence to the English *Geneva Bible* argues against the necessity of his having access to the *King James Bible*,[36] and so from an internal perspective there is nothing preventing a pre-1611 dating of the poem; however, as David Novarr outlines, the absence of the poem in the Group I manuscripts makes a pre-1614 dating unlikely (Novarr argues for a date range of 1615 to the early 1620s).[37] I am inclined to say along with Novarr and Gardner that, in

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[32]Herz and Anthony Raspa, "Response," *Renaissance and Reformation* 20 (1996): 97–98, 98.

[33]*The Life of John Donne, Dr. in Divinity, and Late Dean of Saint Pauls Church London* (London: J.G. for R. Marriot, 1658), p. 54. Hunter evaluates Walton's statement in terms of the liturgical readings from Lamentations in the Church calendar, "An Occasion," p. 19.

[34]Grierson, *The Poems of John Donne*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1912), pp. 225–26.

[35]Gardner, *The Divine Poems of John Donne*, second edition (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), pp. 33–35, p. 104.

[36]Roebuck, "Donne's Lamentations of Jeremy Reconsidered."

[37]Novarr, *Disinterred Muse: Donne's Texts and Contexts* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 142.

general terms, "it seems safe to put it after Donne's ordination"[38]—and therefore after he began his studies in Hebrew, and at the time when he was deeply engaged with the issues of the Bible's language explored above.

Donne's marked preference for double readings in the poem itself are, however, the best proof of his engagement with the issue. Such readings abound in the poem; they operate in various levels of complexity, at times engaging with ambiguous Hebrew directly, and at others introducing English double readings, often with striking, even diametrically opposed images. Ambiguous English word choices can be traced across *The Lamentations of Jeremy*; for example, at chapter one, verse seventeen (lines 66–67 in the poem), Donne gives "it is the Lords command / That *Jacobs* foes girt him." Where Donne chooses "girt," the Hebrew states that Jacob's foes should "*sevivaw*" [surround] him, which Tremellius gives as "*circunstant*" [surround],[39] and the *Geneva Bible* translates as be "rounde about" him.[40] Donne's "girt" suggests an enemy that menacingly surrounds Jacob, as well as an enemy that, like a squire, dresses and prepares Jacob for battle. Donne provides the word "girt" two more times in the poem, playing with both meanings; in his use of the word in chapter two, verse ten, he gives "In sackcloth have they girt themselves" (l. 127). The original is "*hageru*" [they put/bound on], in line with Tremellius's "*accingunt*" [they gird/equip/arm] (p. 188) and the *Geneva Bible*'s "girded them selues" (p. 332[r]). Donne's version chooses girding in the sense of wearing, but also making ready, preparing for the suffering that is to come. In his version of chapter three, verse five, he provides "Hee . . . hath girt mee in / With hemlocke"(ll. 181–83), and which meaning he intends to invoke is entirely unclear; the verse equally could mean *surrounded*, *clothed*, or *equipped*—without recourse to the original's "*wayyaqqaf*" [encompassed], given in Tremellius as "*cingit*"

[38]Gardner, *Divine Poems*, p. 103. Novarr's overview of issues related to dating the poem is the most detailed; see *Disinterred Muse*, pp. 142–46.

[39]*Testamenti Veteris Biblia Sacra* (London: Henry Middleton, 1580), *pars quarta*, p. 187; henceforth, page references to this edition will be provided in parentheses.

[40]*The Bible and Holy Scriptures* [*Geneva Bible*], trans. William Whittingham et al. (Geneva: Rouland Hall, 1560; STC 2093), p. 331[v]; henceforth, page references to this edition will be provided in parentheses.

[encompassed] (p. 189) and the *Geneva Bible* as "compassed" (p. 332[r]), the passage allows all of the meanings of "girt" that have come before.

Donne's repetition of "girt" with different meanings at several points in the poem plays with the double meanings of homonyms—a form of poetic innovation that allows for sonic repetition as well as an exploration of ambiguity. In his version of chapter one, verse eleven, he provides

> And all her people groane, and seeke for bread;
> And they have given, only to be fed,
> All precious things, wherein their pleasure lay:
> How cheape I'am growne, O Lord, behold, and weigh.
> (41–44)

The repetition of *groane* and *growne* (at the same point in the line, no less) allows for an alliterative poetic echoing whilst playing with the highly divergent meanings of this single English homophone.

Donne's rendering of chapter 4, verse 10, offers a particularly arresting ambivalence in his English word choice. The original is "*yedey, nashim raḥamaniyyot, bishshelu yaldeyhen; hayu levarot lamo, be-shever bat-'ammi*" [the hands of compassionate women cook their children, they become their meal in the breaking of the daughter of my people]. Donne translates this passage as: "Women by nature pitifull, have eate / Their children drest with their owne hands for meat" (ll. 303–04). It is, of course, a ghastly moment of *Lamentations*, but Donne makes it even more ghastly in his choice of the word "drest." His choice is in keeping with the intent of Tremellius's "*coquunt*" [cook] (p. 191) or the *Geneva Bible*'s "sodden" (p. 332[v]), but Donne's word and syntax allows him to present an image of women eating the children that they have cared for—dressed in the sense of clothed, dandled, nurtured—alongside an image of dressing a meal. Unlike the utilitarian "cooked" or "sodden," this is a meal that is daintily prepared, with as much care as the word offers for dressing these babies while living. His choice of the word "pitiful" exacerbates the ambivalence; insofar as they nurture their children, they are pitiful in the sense of *compassionate*, but insofar as they have eaten their children, they are pitiful in the sense of evoking pitying contempt.

Such English verbal ambiguities could be rehearsed at length; consider Donne's version of Lamentations 1:12, which gives "All this

concernes not you, who passe by mee" (l. 45) Neither Tremellius's "*nihil ad vos, ô viatores omnes*" [nothing to you, o all travelers] (p. 186) nor the *Geneva Bible*'s version's "Haue ye no regarde, all ye that passe by *this* way?" (p. 331[v]) captures Donne's dual expression of the lack of both involvement and emotional solicitude demonstrated by passersby. Or his version of Lamentations 1:5, "The Lord strooke her with sadnesse" (l. 19) where "strooke" could mean struck in the sense of *hit* or *strike down*, struck in the sense of *astound*, or indeed a *loving* stroke, as one would stroke a cat. Or finally, his version of Lamentations 3:26, "It is both good to trust, and to attend / (The Lords salvation) unto the end" (ll. 215–16), with its dual sense of *waiting* and *being present* for God's salvation.

Yet the most interesting passages of *The Lamentations of Jeremy* are those in which Donne uses English ambiguity to addresses double meaning in the original. In his version of chapter 1, verse 2, Donne's reading is "Still in the night shee weepes" (l. 5).[41] His use of the word "still" is a departure from Tremellius's "*planè*" (p. 186) which should be translated along the lines of "thoroughly," and it is not used in any other English version, although it retains the sense of the *Geneva Bible*'s "continually" (p. 331[r]). The Hebrew original of this verse reads "*bakho tivkeh ba-laylah*" [she weeps intensely in the night]; the phrase forms the intensification by a double use of the verb: literally, "weeps weeping in the night." This is a different kind of "doubleness," of course, than the grammatical issues outlined above, but its role in Donne's general sense of Hebrew as a language that has a prevalence of "doubleness" is highlighted in contemporary versions of the Hebrew Bible. Rashi's commentary, which is provided in the 1524–25 edition of Daniel Bomberg's *Biblia Rabbinica*, edited by the *converso* Jew Jacob ben Hayyim, is "weeping twice over the two destructions,"[42] referring to the first and second temples at Jerusalem. Sebastian Münster's Latin translation of the verse mimics the doubling, with "*Plorando plorabit in nocte*,"[43] and Jean Calvin also notes the doubled

[41]All references to *The Lamentations of Jeremy* are taken from Shawcross, *Complete Poetry*, pp. 371–83.

[42]*Torah Nevi'im u-Khetuvim*, ed. Jacob ben Hayyim ibn Adonijah (Venice: Daniel Bomberg, 1524–25), vol. 4, fol. 101i[r].

[43]*En Tibi Lector Hebraica Biblia*, vol. 2 (Basel: Sebastian Münster, 1535), p. 776.

construction in his commentary on *Lamentations*, where he explains that "he then says the weeping of Jerusalem was continuous: for [he says] first, *Weeping she wept*, and then, *in the night*; which expression means there was no intermission."[44] This Hebrew construction is, of course, a different sort of doubling than polysemous single words, and Donne does not attempt to re-create it; he does, however, in translating *bakho tivkeh*, choose a single multivalent word, "still." His "still in the night she weeps" establishes two evocative images—the first, a powerful sense of ongoing, *excessive* weeping—much more so than *Geneva*'s "continually," Donne's "still" represents the weeping of Jerusalem as something that has exceeded some sort of bound, as though she ought to have stopped but cannot. At the same time, the word allows a sense of stillness in space, of Jerusalem as a woman frozen, immobile in weeping, motionless in the dark. The first meaning of "still" is unrestrained, the second extremely restrained; as a "word of double signification," it produces a potent image and allows this English version to well over with multivalent poetic and semantic potential.

In his reading of Lamentations 2:11–12, Donne deviates from Tremellius and *Geneva* and provides a meaning that is closer to the Hebrew and more responsive to the multivalent meaning offered in the passage. The Hebrew reads:

> *kalu bad-dema'ot 'eynay ḥamarmeru me'ay, nishpakh la'arets kebedi, al-shever bat-ammi; be'atef 'olel veyoneḳ, birḥovot ḳiryah le'immotam yomeru, ayyeh dagan ṿayayin; behit'atefam keḥalal birḥovot 'ir, behishtappekh nafsham, el-ḥeḳ immotam.*
>
> [My eyes are exhausted with tears, my bowels are troubled, my liver is poured on the earth for the destruction of the daughter of my people, for the children and the sucklings faint in the squares of the city

[44] "*Dicit igitur continuum fuisse fletum Ierosolymae: quia primùm,* Flendo fleuit: *deinde* noctu, *qua voce intelligit nullam fuisse intermissionem*"; *Praelectiones: In librum prophetiarum Ieremiae, et Lamentationes* (Geneva: Johannes Crispin, 1563), p. 398[r]. Calvin's Latin version follows Münster with *plorando plorauit noctu*, p. 397[v].

> To their mothers they say, where is grain and wine? They faint as wounded in the squares of the city when their soul was poured out into the bosom of their mother]

The word "faint" here—*be'atef* and *behit'atefam* above, (*'ataf*) in its root form—is alternately translated in the Hebrew Bible as "to turn aside," "to cover oneself," or "to be overwhelmed/overcome," depending on the conjugation. Tremellius translates the passage's two usages of the word as "*obruitur*" and "*obruunt*" [are overwhelmed/buried] (p. 188), which reflects the Hebrew root's sense of "be overwhelmed/covered." *Geneva* similarly translates both occurrences as "swoune/d" (p. 332[r]). Donne, however, elects to translate the single word using two different words, one of which offers an ambiguous reading:

> My bowells are growne muddy, and mine eyes
> Are faint with weeping: and my liver lies
> Pour'd out upon the ground, for miserie
> That sucking children in the streets doe die.
> When they had cryed unto their Mothers, where
> Shall we have bread, and drinke? they fainted there,
> And in the streets like wounded persons lay
> Till 'twixt their mothers breasts they went away.
> (129–36)

In the first instance of the word in the Hebrew, Donne departs from his available sources by translating the word as "die," a more intense reading that perhaps is intended to reflect the Hebrew root's potential meaning of "overcome." In the second occurrence, Donne is closer to the Hebrew than Tremellius and the *Geneva Bible* in his choice of the word "fainted," which in this context could mean either *swooned* as per the *Geneva Bible*, or to *weaken*, to *fade*, or, in Donne's time more than now, to *lose heart*. The multivalence of Donne's choice of "fainted" is highlighted by his decision to repeat the word so close on his use of it four lines previously, in "mine eyes / are faint with weeping." There, "faint" translates "*kalu*" [are exhausted], in the sense of *dimmed* or *weak*. In this passage, Tremellius and *Geneva* address the two close incidences of a multivalent Hebrew word by repeating a single word and meaning. Donne, however, translates the one Hebrew word in two different ways, and then uses one of the English equivalents to

translate a different Hebrew word given in close proximity, much like his repetition of the *groane/growne* homophone in ll. 41–44. There, his sonic repetition allowed a poetic play with the different meanings of a single word in English; here, his repetition allows a single English word to work double-duty for two Hebrew words, one of which is also multivalent and repeated. It is a cross-linguistic, contrapuntal multivalence that demonstrates extraordinary skill and poetic innovation. His choices highlight English and Hebrew's shared tendencies toward multivalence, the ways both texts contain more meaning than can be held by mere words.

## Conclusion: A Double Power By Which He Sung

The words of the Bible, for Donne, overflow with meaning. The Holy Ghost speaks with a "variety, and copiousness . . . [which] is ever abundant, and yet never superfluous" (*Sermons* 9:73). The language of man, particularly in translation, cannot contain that abundance, but through his double-edged, polysemous play, Donne is able to access a fuller measure of the Holy Ghost's modes of communication. For many early modern critics, perceptions of Hebrew ambiguity represented a maddening, obscuring feature of scriptural text; as Catholic critic Rainolds argues, "euery word almost is vsed in verie diuers significations, farre more then is found in latin or greeke or many vulgar languages, and therefore if you presse [an opponent] with one translation or sense, he forthwith hath sundry and diuers senses to flee vnto."[45] Donne, however, reads ambiguous words as sources of plenitude, both in the biblical text and in his own poetic work. In *The Lamentations of Jeremy*, he is able to overlay his own abundant, multivalent—even contrary—words over those of the Hebrew Bible and reflect an aspect of scriptural linguistic form that brings new meaning to his praise of the Holy Ghost's "cloven tongue."

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[45] *A Refutation*, p. 432. Rainolds is, like many other Catholic polemicists, arguing here against the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Old and New Testament in preference for the *Vulgate*.