

4.5 MARTIN BUBER AND FRANZ ROSENZWEIG

Martin Buber (1878–1965) was one of the most influential figures in the study of philosophy and religion in the twentieth century. Among his books are *I and Thou*, *Good and Evil*, *On Judaism*, *Tales of the Hasidim*, and *On the Bible*. Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929) was a theologian and translator (with Buber) of the Hebrew Bible, his principal work being *The Star of Redemption* (1921). A collection of their writings on the Bible and its translation appeared in 1936 under the title *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung*; an English version, *Scripture and Translation*, from which the excerpts below were taken, was published in 1994.

The translation of the Bible into German by Buber and Rosenzweig represents a landmark in Bible translation, with its close philological reading of the Hebrew and Aramaic source texts (cf. the example from Genesis 11 below). The translators focused, notably, on the technical use of the ‘leading-word’ (‘Leitwort’) technique, parallelisms, treating the text as oral in origin, the Hebrew Bible regarded as a whole, in effect an anthology extensively cross-referencing itself. It was therefore essential to render the cross-referencing accurately and clearly, not to blur it, as in the King James translation, where the focus had been also on the potential of the English language, with its richness of synonyms. It is on principles defined by Buber and Rosenzweig that Everett Fox (see Sect. 5.20, below) based his own translation of *The Five Books of Moses* (1995). The basic choice in biblical translation has been between literal and dynamic (as propounded by Eugene Nida, for instance, see Sect. 4.9, below) approaches, both of which may of course be guided by religious impulses, although the dynamic approach usually indicates a concern with proselytism, whereas the literal indicates greater attention to the wording of the original text and is sometimes directed at scholars rather than the general reader.

Fox’s English translation reproduces features, in Buberian/Rosenzweigian fashion, of the Hebrew biblical language. It is worth noting that this coincides with a renewed interest in foreignization. While foreignization is not in the first place tied to literalistic rendering of the Scriptures, the climate created by its renewed acceptability is more hospitable to the kind of translation practised by Fox, which thus seems more linked to radical or progressive developments, than to the *ad verbum* medieval tradition. Ted Hughes is quoted on the back cover of *The Five Books of Moses*: ‘Everett Fox’s new translation of the Old Testament must be one of the most important books. For once since the King James, a translation that comes right out of the heart of the living culture of the thing. I read with read excitement, like a wholly new real text.’ The fact that for Hughes it read like a ‘real text’

(meaning presumably an original rather than a translation text) is a significant contemporary testimony to the success of Fox's procedure.

Tyndale, it is true, translated the Bible so it should be accessible to every ploughboy, whereas those who want still to hear his cadences are governed by a spirit of esotericism rather, its remoteness from contemporary speech giving it the hallmark of the sacred. It was the mellifluousness of the King James translators' language that ensured the longevity of the so-called Authorized Version. It seems unlikely that a version today, designed to be read in churches, could possess such lasting qualities. But it would be invidious to argue that changes in the English language itself might account for this. It is clear to many translation commentators today (see various contributions to Peter France's *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation*, 2000) that intelligibility must take precedence over preserving traditional language, which no longer communicates effectively. This does not, of course, address the question of the validity of the Fox translation, to which Hughes responded so positively, sensing that a primary connection with the ancient source had been restored.

Buber and Rosenzweig were, of course, active at a time of dire crisis for European Jewish culture. Buber wanted passionately to renew, as he put it, 'the dialogue between heaven and earth'. In 1938, in an essay written in Palestine, 'The How and Why of our Bible Translation' (see *Scripture and Translation*, pp. 205–19), Buber alludes to the German assault on the Hebrew Bible, seeking to separate Old and New Testaments in a Nazi-inspired attempt to purge 'Jewish influence' from German culture. The bulk of Buber's and Rosenzweig's collaborative translation work, of course, was done some years before (1925–9), but these disturbing political-cultural developments were apparent already. The aim of the two translator-philosophers was, idealistically, to bring to life a spoken sacred text, in a time of crisis, to recover the Word embedded in that text and make it resonate in the living language of their contemporaries, as Luther had done during the Reformation, but by returning in the first place to the text itself rather than projecting it immediately onto the German language. Their motivation was essentially religious, but their practice was text-based.

From Franz Rosenzweig, 'Scripture and Word: On the New Bible Translation' (late 1925), in Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*, trans. by Lawrence Rosenwald with Everett Fox (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1994), 40–2

[The radical agenda of restoring orality to what has been written down is here spelled out. Rosenzweig's fervour is clearly discernible in his desire that God's word should sound again, be conveyed somehow in writing. A reform of the written scriptures amounts to

a kind of religious revival. Rosenzweig announces a revitalization of the language of religion, through translation, as Luther had done almost exactly four centuries before.]

Every word is a spoken word. The book originally served the word, whether declaimed, sung, or spoken; it sometimes still serves it today, as in theatrically living drama or opera. Opera people talk of the script as something technical, instrumental, provisional; once, that was how people characterized the rank and condition of books generally, vis-à-vis the spoken word. But technique has a dangerous power over those who wield it; all unintentionally the means become an end, the provisional becomes the permanent, the technical becomes a magic spell. The book no longer serves the word. It becomes the word's ruler and hindrance; it becomes Holy Scripture. [...]

But one book—and precisely the book from which in our Judeo-Christian culture this fateful scripturalization and literarization of the word had its beginning, and in connection with which the antidotes of oral teaching and of tradition were first tried out—one book alone among all the books of our cultural horizon cannot content itself with this antidote of an oral tradition to complement it. This book alone must not, even *qua* book, enter entirely into *Schrifttum* into literature.¹ Its unique content forbids it to become wholly *Schrift*. It must remain word. It cannot attain the autonomous, aesthetic value of *Schrift* because it cannot attain the distance that is the precondition of this value. Its content, the essential part of its content, refuses displacement into the objectivity, the separatedness, the *madeness* that characterize all that becomes literature. Only its accessories are capable of becoming literature, and it is these accessories that a literary consideration must content itself with. But the essential content is precisely what escapes the specifying and distancing power of *Schrift*: the word of God to man, the word of man to God, the word of men before God. We have only to consider the letter—the most legitimate form of writing, the form always addressed to an immediate need and necessity,² the form from which all other forms borrow whatever legitimacy they have—to see that this legitimation of writing can never pertain to the word of and to and before God; God is *present*, and if he acts through messengers, they are not postmen bringing yesterday's news, which perhaps in the meantime has already been overtaken by the intervening events; rather in this moment of theirs God is what acts immediately in them and speaks immediately through them.

It is, accordingly, a vital question for Scripture, for this one *Schrift*, whether the word is to be merely adjacent to it or within it. The word of God cannot dispense with the word of man—the true, spoken, sounding word of man. The Bible alone, among all books of the literary epoch, whether literary or pre-literary, demands a pre-literary mode of reading—demands, that is, what the Hebrew expression for reading means, which is familiar in the west from the Koran and which has also yielded what words pertaining to writing have not yielded, namely the most familiar term denoting the Old Testament: the

qeri'ah, the 'calling out'. It is in response to this command that in all worship Scripture is customarily read aloud; it is in the service of this command that Luther in his translation has recourse to the spoken language of the people. The crucial question to ask of any new translation is whether this command has been fulfilled at a given time and for a given people.

The fetters that today hold all written German mute are constituted by the semantic system in which the words are embedded: punctuation. [...] When, therefore, these fetters must be loosed at any cost [...] we need [...] drastic measures. Martin Buber has found these measures. The bond of the tongue must be loosed by the eye. We must free from beneath the logical punctuation that is sometimes its ally and sometimes its foe the fundamental principle of natural, oral punctuation: the act of breathing.

Breath is the stuff of speech; the drawing of breath is accordingly the natural segmenting of speech. [...]

TRANSLATORS' NOTES

1. The German *Schrifttum* is often translated 'literature'; but it is, as Rosenzweig goes on to suggest, simply an extension of *Schrift*; if *Schrift* is 'writing', *Schrifttum* is 'writingness.' 'Writingness', however, transgresses what Rosenzweig calls the 'boundaries of linguistic possibility'; so the translation retains the German term.

Readers should be reminded of the multiple meanings of *Schrift*: 'Scripture', 'writing', 'literature'. When those various terms appear in the translation they most often render the one German term; when the precise term is crucial to the argument the translation retains the German.

2. There's a crucial pun here: because, Rosenzweig writes, the letter comes in aid of an immediate need (*Not*, 'need'), it is truly necessary (*not-wendig*, 'necessary'). Now *wendig* means 'averting' or 'turning'; so by separating the two components of the word Rosenzweig suggests that that is necessary which averts our need, or which we turn to in our need.

From Franz Rosenzweig, 'Scripture and Luther' (July 1926), in Buber and Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*, 47–8

[See also Sect. 2.2, above on Luther.]

[Much of this essay has to do with the uniqueness of Luther's translation, with the fact, as Rosenzweig sees it, that 'every great work of one language can in a certain sense be translated into another language only once'. There is one particular moment in which 'the genii of the two languages are wedded'. At such a moment, the translator 'will be led by the honourable belief that the more faithfully the original enters his language, the more abundantly the needs of this great national hour will be fulfilled'. This is a unique historical moment that 'does not return, because it does not need to return'. 'No new translation, therefore, can attain a comparable national significance. Luther may have allowed for and indeed demanded revision, but this is now impossible, because his translation has become the fundamental book not only of a particular church but of the

national language itself.' Attempts to improve on Luther, from a Bible criticism point of view (*Wissenschaft*) have not succeeded.

The translator however can and must leap over the obstacles, 'if only that we may be free then to stand still, and not be in danger.'

Of Luther's comments on his translation, the most widely known are those articulating his desire to make his translation German, generally comprehensible German: 'to produce clear language, comprehensible to everyone, with an undistorted sense and meaning.'¹ Such comments are in fact predominant in his work; and the great advance he made over previous Bible translations was most striking for his contemporaries in precisely this respect.

But he was also altogether conscious of the other side of his work, of the movement of the German reader in the direction of the alien original, the genius of the alien language. The separate preface to the German Psalter is the most instructive of all Luther's writings on translation. [...]

The reasons, or reason rather, for which Luther sometimes asks his reader to 'give the Hebrew some room' and to 'put up with such words' are stated by him [...]

But we have also sometimes translated word for word though we could have done it otherwise and more clearly, and for this reason: the words have something important in them. Psalm 68:18, for example: 'Thou art gone up on high, and hast led captivity captive.' An idiomatic translation would be: 'hast freed the prisoners.' But that is too weak and does not yield the rich, subtle sense of the Hebrew: 'thou hast led captivity captive'—that is, not only has Christ released the prisoners, but he has in the process taken away the prison, taken it captive, so that it can never again take us prisoner, and our redemption is eternal. [...] To honor such teaching, and for the comfort of our souls, we must retain such words, must put up with them, and so give the Hebrew some room where it does better than German can.

It is perfectly clear here how the realms of the two principles, that of moving the text and that of moving the reader, are bounded [Rosenzweig has previously referred to Schleiermacher's distinction between translations that leave the writer in peace and move the reader in his direction, and those that leave the reader in peace and move the writer]. The former principle is ordinarily the dominant one, for Luther as for every other translator [...] and that Luther speaks at such length of this self-evident side of his work becomes intelligible only when we understand that he may well have felt himself the first competent practitioner of the translator's art. The translations of his predecessors swarmed with Latinisms—not, however, in adherence to the latter principle, but simply from bungling.

[...] But where, according to Luther, does the necessity arise 'to give the Hebrew some room'? Where the statement is very important, directed to us, 'to our souls'—that is, where for Luther, for the living Christian, the Scriptures are the immediate compelling

word of God, living truth and living consolation [...] where for him, the Christian, it was the living word of God—there and only there, but there necessarily, it had to be taken word for word, and translated in ‘rigid’ literalness. Elsewhere—and for Luther in the Old Testament ‘elsewhere’ was the chief part of the text—[...] the translator ‘sends the Hebrew words packing, and speaks the meaning of them in the best German he can’.

Luther’s belief, then, determines at every level how the work of mediation is to proceed—that is, where to leave the word in peace and where the hearer. But Luther’s belief implies Luther’s concept of a delimitable (because limited) religious content. Our time has lost his notion of revelation [...] Our time, then, must in translating be permitted to ask the book the essential religious question all over again, as firmly and assuredly as it can [...]

[...] Writing does of course everywhere shape turns of oral expression in accord with its own formality; but outside the sphere of experience where writing reigns, the language remains free and productively powerful. [...] So also in the life of a people: a moment comes when writing ceases to be a handmaiden of language and becomes its mistress. This moment comes when a matter encompassing the whole life of the people has been cast into writing, i.e., when there is for the first time a book that everyone simply ‘must have read.’ [...]

For the voice of the Bible is not to be enclosed in any space—not in the inner sanctum of a church, not in the linguistic sanctum of a people, not in the circle of the heavenly images moving above a nation’s sky. Rather this voice seeks again and again to resound from outside—from outside this church, this people, this heaven. It does not keep its sound from echoing in this or that restricted space, but it wants itself to remain free. If somewhere it has become a familiar, customary possession, it must again and anew, as a foreign and unfamiliar sound, stir up the complacent satedness of its alleged possessor from outside. This book and this book alone among all the books of humankind must not find its end in the treasure-house of human culture—because, precisely, it must not find an end in the first place. [...]

The Luther Bible was when first written what the Bible should be, was the thing through which, as often as the Bible becomes it, it establishes itself as unique among all human, i.e., merely human books: a sensation. [...] The Luther Bible was, then, a trumpet-call in the ear of those who had fallen asleep happy in their possession of the ‘received and certified text.’ But it did not remain that; it became itself a possession, a national possession. [...] [O]nly once was it a storm churning up the waters of the national life before these were gathered and channelled into their individual channels; and having been that once it could not be that again, since it was now a possession and thus safely chained up again. [...]

[...] Scripture must be read differently and transmitted differently than Luther read and transmitted it? Luther had his reasons for sometimes giving the Hebrew some room,

for expanding German till it accustomed itself to the Hebrew, namely that on occasion the text spoke of 'teaching' and the 'comfort of our souls.' We do not know from what words teaching and comfort may come; we believe that the hidden springs of teaching and comfort may someday break through to us from every word of this book. Ought not Luther's reasons incline us to a new reverence toward the word, to a reverence that necessarily must renew our reading, our understanding, and our translation.

[Rosenzweig then pronounces on the limitations of *Wissenschaft* translation (i.e. translation based on biblical criticism), which has dispersed the aura of sanctity once surrounding the Bible, humanizing it and 'offering readers of every sort the content of the Old Testament, with the means of current biblical research, in clear contemporary German' (Foreword to Kautzsch-Bertholet *Textbibel*).]

For—it is almost embarrassing to state such truisms, but also necessary—it is impossible to transmit the content without at the same time transmitting the form. How something is said is not peripheral to what is said. The melody makes the music. [...]

Again: this argument is not at all aimed at the disparagement of individual translators, who surely gave this translation their best efforts. Rather it is aimed at *Wissenschaft* itself, which in translating is simply not *wissenschaftlich* enough. It has shaken many persons' trust in the Luther translation; but it has not put in place of that translation the translation of contemporary belief and its expressive forms—which is, after all, consciously or unconsciously, what all its work is meant to serve. [...]

Aside, then, from its correction of particular errors, the modern translation offers even in a scholarly sense very little that is better, and much that is worse, than Luther.

Luther himself saw the scholarly significance of his work as lying in his return to the original text. [...] Luther the revolutionary, however, was still inwardly linked to what he was overthrowing. The vulgate was indeed [...] a soothing pillow for the conscience and a padding for the door of the cultivated man's study against disruptive noises from outside. [...] In other words: when Luther investigated the meaning of the Hebrew text, he was not thinking hebraically; nor was he, as he later did in rendering the investigated meaning into German, thinking Germanically; he was thinking Latinately.

NOTE

1. Preface to the Book of Job, editions of 1524 and 1525.

From Martin Buber, 'Leitwort Style in Pentateuch Narrative' (from a lecture, January 1927), in Buber and Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*, 114–28

[In this lecture, Buber identifies a salient feature of biblical prosody, ignored in Ciceronian fashion by the King James translators, who on the contrary exploited the multiplicity of

English synonyms (see Sect. 2.9, above, on the Authorized (King James) Version). With their emphasis on structure and on the poetics of the text, Buber and Rosenzweig strove to represent more fully the parallelism in the Bible. Buber stresses, however, that the recommended procedure should be adhered to only where appropriate; it is emphatically not to be regarded as a general rule or as an insistence on a metaphrastic approach. The translator's task, in Rosenzweig's words, is 'to weigh the claims of local context against the claims of global context'. Buber gives no useful advice on how this is to be accomplished, but the example set by him and Rosenzweig in identifying 'thematic resonances' is illuminating.]

By *Leitwort* I understand a word or word root that is meaningfully repeated within a text or sequence of texts or complex of texts; those who attend to these repetitions will find a meaning of the text revealed or clarified, or at any rate made more emphatic. [...] Such measured repetition, corresponding to the inner rhythm of the text—or rather issuing from it—is probably the strongest of all techniques for making a meaning available without articulating it explicitly [...] [S]uch repetition can achieve not only aesthetic value, as manifested notably in the verse-forms of the Elder Edda, but also a special and irreplaceable value of *statement*. This value consists in the fact that the meaning to be stated is portrayed without any tacked-on moral, i.e., without any disruption or distortion of the pure form of the narrative. [...]

But nowhere, probably, does this happen with such singular power as in the narratives of the Pentateuch. The strictness of the form here arises from the profound intention to report, and *only* to report; and precisely for this reason the message may not impose itself on the form. [...] [T]hose who listen will hear the higher meaning in the similarity of sound. A connection is established between one passage and another, and thus between one stage of the story and another—a connection that articulates the deep motive of the narrated event more immediately than could a pinned-on moral. Epic diction never overflows, never becomes rhetoric or lyric; the *Leitwort* rhythm is a genuinely epic rhythm, the appropriate artistic *signum* of a mystery stretching around and into the world of aesthetic form.

[Buber then gives examples, mostly from Genesis and Numbers of 'verbal atmosphere' generated by multiple recurrences, which communicates to the reader what is at issue in any particular instance.]

From Martin Buber, 'On Word Choice in Translating the Bible: In Memoriam Franz Rosenzweig', (Summer 1930), in Buber and Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*, 73–89

[Intense concentration on the text as such is passionately urged. The verbal texture as a whole is considered, as a living or organic whole, rather than the focus being exclusively on the particular *Leitwort*, with its thematic significance.]

The special obligation to create a new version of the Bible, which came alive in our time and led to our undertaking, resulted from the discovery that the passage of time had largely turned the Bible into a palimpsest [...] The Bible asks us for a reverent intimacy with its meaning and its sensory concreteness; but that has been replaced by a mix of uncomprehending respect and unthinking familiarity [...] and its relation to the real Bible resembles the relation of the murdered God of our time [...] to the living God of reality. [...]

[...] Even the most significant translations of the Bible that we possess [...] do not aim principally at maintaining the original character of the book as manifested in word choice, in syntax, and in rhythmical articulation. They aim rather at transmitting to the translators' actual community... a reliable foundational document [...] [T]hey do not *a priori* ignore the peculiarities of its constituent elements, of its structure, of its dynamic; but they easily enough sacrifice those peculiarities when stubborn 'form' seems to hinder the rendering of 'content' [...] Revelation is accomplished in the human body and the human voice, i.e. in *this* body and *this* voice, in the mystery of their uniqueness. The prophet's proclamation consists not only of its symbols and parables, but also of the fundamental sensory concreteness of even the subtlest Hebrew concepts, of the taut stretching in the architecture of the ancient Hebrew sentence, of the Hebrew manner of relating adjacent or even widely separated words through similarity of verbal root or similarity of sound, of the powerful movement of Hebrew rhythm that goes beyond all meter [...] *Theoretically* speaking, the biblical messages cannot be rendered in their fusion of meaning and sound; but practically speaking they can. Can, that is, approximately—as approximately as one is allowed by the boundaries of the language one translates into. But the translator must press towards these boundaries again and again—to the real boundaries, that is—and must accept instruction as to what is permitted him and what is not only from the mouths of the supreme watchmen of language.

[However, Buber is careful not to overemphasize the potential of this method. As a translator himself, he is conscious of the practical limitations, but insists on the need to listen with great concentration to the source text, its resonances, its echoes, to always bear in mind that its origin is in the spoken not the written word. At the same time, this practical intelligence leads him to recommend freedom in expanding the word store, creating neologisms, resuscitating obsolete terms. As Buber says, 'It has been one of the strongest confirmations of our method that we have been able to reproduce such verbal patterns' (he has discussed the translation of *ohel mo'ed*, referring to the movable sanctuary of the desert). 'In both their breadth of manifestation and in their unity', he sees it as the translator's function to return to terms, which have become technical, their living

associations (e.g. *Shabbat* must be delivered ‘from the rigidity of “Sabbath”’. He discusses also the awesome task of rendering of the name of God, the tetragrammaton YHWH.)

[...] The auditory patterns of German can never *reproduce* the auditory forms of Hebrew; but they can, in growing from an analogous impulse and in exercising an analogous effect, *correspond* to them Germanically, can *Germanize* them.

To meet the demands of such a task, the translator must elicit from the letter of the Hebrew text its actual auditory form; he must understand the writtenness of Scripture as for the most part the record of its spokenness [...]

The auditory form of the German translation should then correspond to spokenness [...] [I]ts unfamiliarity is itself necessary, is indeed the one necessity, if [...] a translation is to produce an encounter between the Bible and the people today [...], to create a western equivalent of this, a German equivalent, we have to reach past the present verbal repertory towards the defamiliarized—indeed toward the obsolete and forgotten [...] Sometimes the translator must venture new formations, if he can find in the established German vocabulary no exact equivalent for a biblical institution or concept. No doubt the biblical world will seem [...] in many ways linguistically sharper and more vivid [...]; concepts will in the translation be distanced from the familiar, and will accordingly present their concrete fundamental significance more emphatically than they do in the original [...]

From Martin Buber, ‘A Translation of the Bible’ (1927), in Buber and Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*, 166–71

[Martin Buber sums up what Rosenzweig’s and his aims were. So radical and audacious are they even now, pushing language to its limits that some repetition seems in order. Buber, below, reiterates the same message even more emphatically than before, in terms that are echoed later by the likes of Rothenberg and Tedlock (see Sect. 5.7, below, Ethnopoetics)].

The ‘Old Testament’ has never before been translated by writers seeking to return to the concrete, fundamental meaning of each individual word: previous translators have been contented to put down something ‘appropriate’, something ‘corresponding’. [...] [I]n Leviticus the ‘man who takes the wife of his brother’ is assigned a punishment corresponding to the sin: ‘he has revealed the nakedness of his brother, and they will remain naked of children.’ That is why Abraham calls himself not ‘childless’ but ‘childbare’, ‘childstripped.’ To undertake a genuine translation of the Bible entails now and then venturing such words; whether posterity will receive them or reject them is not for the living to know.

We have attempted also [...] to distinguish synonyms wherever German permits, i.e., not to render two distinct Hebrew words by one German one, nor—at least within a single sequence—to render a single Hebrew word by two German ones. We have further attempted, in cases where a common root linked various words, to retain that link in German. [...]

The individual word, then, in its original concrete meaning is crucial to us. But that is not to say that the Hebrew verbal sequence is something secondary, something not to be maintained against the conventions of the language into which we are translating. We know of no 'content' separable from this form in which it has been transmitted to us, and transferable into a form of a different sort. What matters is to naturalize this form in a quantitatively different language in such a way as the limits of the language allow—the time, and not merely the conventions. [...]

We take seriously not only the text's semantic characteristics but also its acoustic ones. It became clear to us, accordingly, that the text's abundant alliterations and assonances could not be understood in aesthetic terms alone; often if not always it is passages of religious importance in which assonance and alliteration occur, and both assonance and alliteration thus help make this importance emerge more vividly. [...]

We have, as I said, had in mind the Bible 'aloud'. We proceed from the notion that the Bible is a product of living recitation, and is intended for living recitation; that speech is its nature, and the written text only a form for preserving it. Hence our method of rendering its rhythm. Our translation is the first *colometric* translation [...] i.e. the first that gives the text its natural division into lines of meaning as these are determined by the laws of human breathing and human speech, with each line constituting a rhythmic unit. [...]

[The final passage actually precedes the last of the above passages, but is placed here as an introduction to the translation of the Buber Rosenzweig German translation of the Babel story (which it would be appropriate, of course, to compare with the Everett Fox translation of the same biblical passage, quoted below. See also other versions of this famous biblical passage).]

[...] the remarkable account of how the architects of Babel built of *lebenah*, brick, rather than *eben*, stone, and used as mortar not *homer*, loam or clay, but *hemar*, pitch or asphalt [...] This is no pun; rather the acoustic similarity emphasizes the nature of the situation, in which the builders must discard natural materials for artificial ones, or at any rate for materials that can be brought out of the earth only with considerable effort. The first half of the verse, 'so for them brick-stone [*Backstein*] was like building-stone [*Baustein*]', worked well enough; but the second half needs improvement.

Genesis 11: 1–9 in Buber and Rosenzweig's translation.

From Die Schrift (Die fünf Bücher der Weisung), Verdeutscht von Martin Buber gemeinsam mit Franz Rosenzweig (12., verbesserte Auflage der neubearbeiteten Ausgabe von 1954) (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997), 33–4.

11, 1 Über die Erde allhin war eine Mundart und einerlei Rede.

2 Da wars wie sie nach Osten wanderten: sie fanden ein Gesenk im Lande Schinar und setzten sich dort fest.

3 Sie sprachen ein Mann zum Genossen:

Heran! backen wir Backsteine und brennen wir sie zu Brande!

So war ihnen der Backstein statt Bausteins und das Roherdpech war ihnen statt Roterdmörtels.

4 Nun sprachen sie:

Heran! bauen wir uns eine Stadt und einen Turm, sein Haupt bis an den Himmel, und machen wir uns einen Namen,

sonst werden wir zerstreut übers Antlitz aller Erde!

5 ER fuhr nieder,

die Stadt und den Turm to besehen, die die Söhne des Menschen bauten.

6 ER sprach:

Da, einerlei Volk ist es und eine Mundart in allen, und nur der Beginn dies ihres Tuns— nichts wäre nunmehr ihnen zu steil, was alles sie zu tun sich ersännen.

Heran! fahren wir nieder und vermengen wir dort ihre Mundart, daß sie sich nicht mehr vernehmen ein Mann den Mund des Genossen.

8 ER zerstreute sie von dort übers Antlitz aller Erde,

daß sie es lassen müssen, die Stadt zu bauen.

9 Darum ruft man ihren Namen Babel, Gemenge,

den vermengt hat ER dort die Mundart aller Erde,

und zerstreut von dort hat ER sie übers Antlitz aller Erde.

Literal translation by A. Eysteinsson

11, 1 Over all the Earth there was one way of mouth and one kind of speech.

2 Then it was that they wandered to the East: they found a valley/lower land in the land of Shinar and they settled there.

3 They spoke, each man to his fellow man:

Go to it! let us bake stones of brick and let us burn them in the fire! [repetitive and alliterative: backen/Backsteine; brennen/Brande]

So for them the brickstone was instead of building stone, and the raw pitch was for them instead of red mortar.

4 Now they spoke:

Go to it! Let us build ourselves a city and a tower, its head as far as the sky,
and let us make ourselves a name,
or else we shall be dispersed over the face of the whole Earth!

5 HE went down,

to look at the city and the tower, which the sons of man were building.

6 HE spoke:

There, this is one kind of people and one way of mouth in all, and now the beginning of this deed of theirs—

nothing would hereafter be too steep for them, whatever they would think to do.

7 Go to it! let us go down there we shall mix/confuse their way of mouth,
so that each man no longer perceives the mouth of his fellow man.

8 HE dispersed them from there over the face of the whole Earth,
so they had to cease building the city.

9 There one calls their name Babel, mixture/confusion,
for there HE confused the way of mouth of the whole Earth,
and HE dispersed them from there over the face of the whole Earth.