

“Earth,” “Land,” and Other Words: Why the Translation of *’erets* Looms So Large

One Word in Hebrew → Multiple Words in English

To Ian Michael the words, “earth,” “world,” “land,” and “country” are quite different. With “earth” he almost certainly envisions a rotating sphere—Planet Earth—in relationship to other planets and the sun...all of them spheres. With “world” he may picture something similar. On the other hand, “land” and “country” are almost never visually or conceptually attached to the solar system. They are not spherical, nor do they rotate. These English words are clearly less imposing (less important?) and denote a much more limited reality.

There is, however, another aspect of “land” that Ian Michael readily recognizes in appropriate settings, but it may not come to mind when he when he reads the Bible. It is “land” that evokes a deep-seated, almost lyrical attachment to one’s roots, an attachment that is difficult to capture adequately in prose. It is this “land” that is the subject of poetry and song. This is the “land” of Sir Walter Scott in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, who wondered, “Breathes there a man with soul so dead / Who never to himself hath said / ‘This is my own, my native land’?” For Francis Scott Key it is “the land of the free and the home of the brave.” For generations of American school children it is the “sweet land of liberty” of which they sing in the words of Samuel Francis Smith—the “land where my fathers died,” the “land of the pilgrims’ pride.” And for Woody Guthrie in the 1970s, “This land is my land, this land is your land.” Indeed, “this land was made for you and me.”



What the Translator Pictures Will Be What the Reader Gets

How can it be that the English words “earth” and “world,” “land” and “country”, words that produce such different images in our minds, can all express the meaning of the same Hebrew word? As a translator works—“carrying across” the meaning of the source language (Hebrew) into the target language (English)—his/her mental picture of what is expressed in the source language will influence the choice of words in the target language. For this reason, whatever Ian Michael pictures when reading a Bible version in English is going to be similar to the picture the translator had upon reading the underlying Hebrew. Hopefully, *’erets*, when translated, conveys the same mental picture that existed in the minds of the original author and his audience.



If the translator believed the original author and audience pictured the whole of Planet Earth in the throes of a Flood of “Biblical proportions,” then he/she will render *’erets* as “earth.” So, is “earth” the correct rendering of the Hebrew *’erets*, or would it be better translated as “land”? The answer, of course, depends on what Moshe pictured when reading or hearing *’erets*; that is the way *’erets* should be translated. The Genesis text was *addressed to Moshe* and it is his mental picture—his understanding (not the translator’s)—that ought to determine the meaning of the text.

The Meaning of “Earth” Has Changed Over Time

In Shakespeare’s England, which was also the England of the King James Version, “earth” most often meant dirt or soil and rarely, if ever, did it connote the entire “world” which by then was known to be spherical in shape (although the sun was still thought to travel around it). Today “earth” is virtually synonymous with Planet Earth circling the sun. This is so because lunar missions beginning in the 1950s have enabled Ian Michael to see his home planet as it appears when viewed from outer space.

So for him, “earth” in a cosmological context such as Genesis 1, almost inevitably means Planet Earth. For Moshe that was impossible, for the obvious reason that for him the *’erets* was fixed and certainly did not travel around the sun held in its orbit by gravity. On the contrary, *’erets* could never be moved; God said so (Ps. 104:5).

***’erets* in Genesis and Some Very Interesting Statistics**

From Creation to the end of Genesis chapter 11, the translators of the King James Version decided 88% of the time (84/95) that *erets* means “earth.” In the rest of Genesis they decided that *’erets* meant “land” 88% of the time (162/183). This is clearly *not* a random happening. This total about-face from “earth” to “land” underscores the influence of translator judgment on what our Bible says.

“Earth” to Tyndale Meant Dirt, Soil, the Ground on Which we Live

Tyndale, laboring over the first English Old Testament translation directly from Hebrew (1530 CE) did not have our problem with the translation of *’erets*, for in his day “earth” could not have been taken for Planet Earth. At that time neither Tyndale nor anyone else knew that “earth” was a planet. For Tyndale the choice of “earth” or of “land” was a choice between words with very similar meanings. However, within a hundred years of Tyndale’s death, following the discoveries of Copernicus and Galileo, most well-read people in England and Europe understood “earth” (*’erets*) to be “Planet Earth”.

Before the Flood, Moshe was informed that God was going to “make it rain upon the **land** (*’erets*) for forty days and forty nights” and would “blot out all existing things...from the face of the soil” (*adamah*). On reading Genesis now, Ian Michael may well picture God promising to “...make it rain upon the entire **planetary globe** (*’erets*) for forty days and forty nights” and to “blot out all existing things ...from the face of the soil” (*adamah*) (Gen 7:4).

After the Flood, Moshe understood that God had indeed “blotted out all living things that were on the face of the soil (*adamah*)...They were blotted out from the **land**” (*’erets*). For Ian Michael reading Genesis now, God “blotted out all living things that were on the face of the soil (*adamah*)...They were blotted out from the **planetary globe**” (*’erets*) (Genesis 7:23). Given that both of these texts link “face of the soil” (*adamah*) with *’erets*, we are convinced that translating *’erets* as “earth” is now linguistically in error. It is indeed misleading. A translation that invites the reader to link a “planetary globe” (*’erets*) with “the face of the soil” (*adamah*) is certainly incorrect (where “correct” is what Moshe would have understood by *’erets*).

Conclusion

Has any mischief resulted from Tyndale’s innocent selection of “earth” as an English equivalent for the Hebrew *’erets*; a selection that was perpetuated by the KJV and has been reinforced by virtually every translator since? Absolutely! Because subsequent translators continued to use “earth” even though in the interim its meaning had changed—for most moderns—to “Planet Earth,” the Bible has been accused of promulgating pseudo-science. Rendering *’erets* as “earth” has lent credence to the mistaken—but widely accepted—notion that there is ongoing “warfare between science and religion.” It has also led to the idea that if the Flood was truly “global” in extent, then evidence of that Flood would still remain in sedimentary rock layers over the entire planet, the planet that Ian Michael envisions whenever he reads about the “earth” in Genesis. The validity of Flood geology thus rests on whether *’erets* actually refers to Planet Earth or to what Moshe understood it to be—something on the order of “land” as in Moshe’s Promised Land, the Land of Israel (*’erets Israel*), the “land” that, in the beginning, God had created along with the “sky.”

“To begin with, God created the sky and the land” Gen 1:1 (OHV).