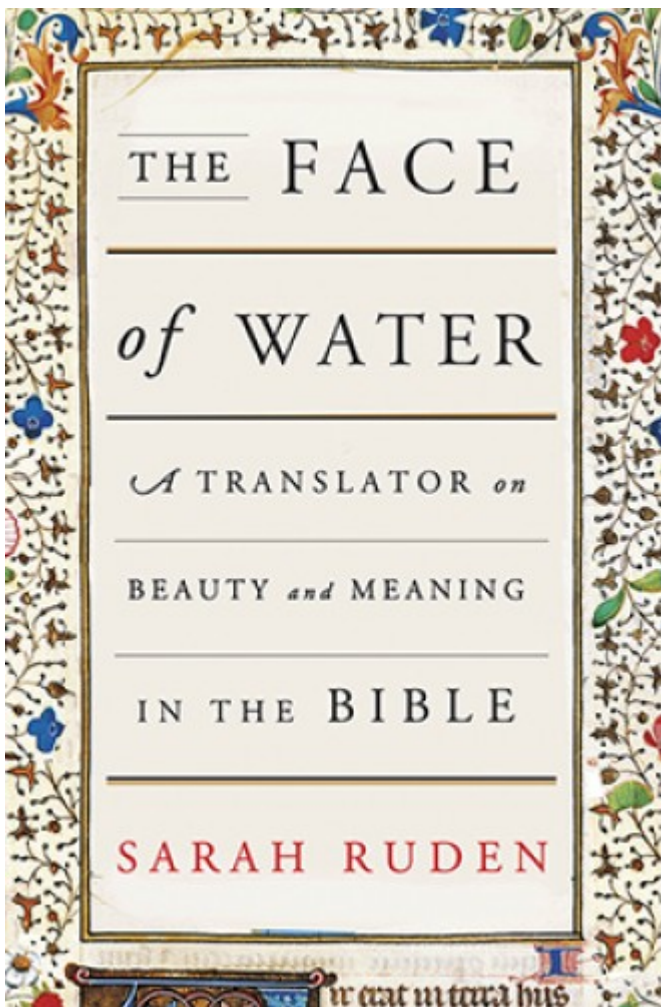


A feast of scriptural language

Sarah Ruden writes some of the most sumptuous words about Bible words I've ever read.

by [James C. Howell](#) in the [July 19, 2017](#) issue

In Review



The Face of Water

A Translator on Beauty and Meaning in the Bible

By Sarah Ruden
Pantheon

It's a pleasant shock to come upon a book that invites us simply to luxuriate in biblical texts. Sarah Ruden's new book is a savory feast that I didn't want to end. There is no call to action here; just a deep reveling in the words of scripture that we know more thinly than we'd like.

Ruden is curiously qualified to take us on a fresh journey into the biblical text. A Harvard-trained philologist who teaches at Brown, she has published translations of Aeschylus, Aristophanes, the *Aeneid*, and Augustine. She acknowledges that the Bible is a tough book to get acquainted with: even for those who know it well, "it seems to need professional help."

Ruden's translations deftly capture the rhythms and emphases of the original language. Her version of the Lord's prayer begins: "Father, our father in the heavens above, Spoken in holiness must be your name." From John's prologue: "And the idea became a body, flesh and blood, and pitched a tent and sojourned among us, and we saw his splendor." And from the Beatitudes: "Happy are those starving and parched for justice, because they will feast to the fullest."

As she invites us into the world of the text, Ruden reminds us that we can't get there: "The look—and smells, and sounds—of night in ancient Palestine, and the pressures of those kinds of paths beneath those kinds of sandals, and the itch of those fleas, and a great many other sensations are unrecoverable." Yet, she tenderly ponders syntax and verbal forms to excavate emotions that readers might otherwise miss. Mourning his dead son, David says, "I will go to him, but he will not return to me." The participle "go" implies habitual, continuous action, not the future tense. As Ruden articulates it, David is "in a lifelong trudge toward his lost child, not just transported to him after his own death. . . . He will never lose the will to see him again."

Hebrew students early on learn to translate the *vav*-consecutive—the Hebrew letter *vav* combined with the slightly longer *vayehi*, a common locution in the historical books—as "and it came to pass." But Ruden shows how it's so much more complicated, delicious, and heartbreaking than "and it came to pass." Depending on what's happening in the story, this *vav*-consecutive might mean "something new arose," or "and get this!" The characters in the stories may not understand what's

unfolding, but readers are tipped off to a turning point, where the trouble starts, “when David or someone else could have held back the wrecking ball.”

In her exposition of Ezekiel 37, Ruden marvels that a mere 13 Hebrew words in the first verse somehow require 33 English words in translation. She notes how the exclamation *hinnei*, which occurs six times as the chapter begins, has a far more astonished shock than its usual translation “Lo” can capture. She recalls a professor friend suggesting that it’s really more like “Shit . . .”

Ruden’s methodology is to pair a familiar Old Testament text with a similarly beloved text from the New Testament. Linking Psalm 23 with Revelation 7:9–17, she attends mesmerizingly to small twists and turns in the texts before concluding:

This tiny lamb in the center of the throne, like a toddler on a CEO’s office chair, will now be the caretaker. This scenario is a bizarre converse of the Twenty-Third Psalm. God doesn’t, like a shepherd, care for a single helpless sheep and ensure its comfort and survival; instead, a single tiny divine lamb cares for a very large number of human beings—and the lamb is so powerful because it was, at a critical moment in the past, weak and helpless and had its life annihilated in agony.

Her theological insight also shows as she models how to handle the Bible’s horrific passages. Numbers 5 tells how a jealous husband can have his wife poisoned to see if his suspicions are true. Ruden explains: “Thing is, those verses, in themselves, are not in charge.” Noting how rabbis regarded these verses as inspired without actually killing any women, she continues: “They have not had to be implemented literally but still yield guidance. Scripture has, over time and on balance, not been placed in the position of a tyrant but rather at the service of ideas about a just and protecting God.”

I was befuddled by the pitch on the book’s back cover, which declares that “the King James Bible is considered the definitive and most accurate translation of the Bible.” It’s not fair to blame an author for cover blurbs, but Ruden invites the reader into each passage she covers using the 1611 KJV. In a barely detectable footnote on page xix, she explains that this version is her default “because of its beauty and familiarity.” But I wonder how familiar it is in our day. I would defend the highfalutin English of the KJV as fitting to the sanctity of scripture, and I lean toward those scholars who say the Old Testament was composed in elevated language rather

than common street usage Hebrew. But I found myself frustrated as I read Ruden's book. Except for the utterly familiar KJV translation of Psalm 23, her starting points were relatively unfamiliar to me.

Ruden herself exhibits some ambivalence about what to do with modern translations—even if “modern” to her means the 17th century. Noting how translations inevitably get invaded by unintended biases, Ruden is unruffled:

That societies pulled the translations along with them, making sure it reflected their own current concerns more and the concerns of the texts' long-gone originators less, should be surprising to nobody and is blameworthy only in the eyes of perfectionist prigs. . . . Yes, newer versions in alien languages aren't as good. And humanity is fallen, and the U.S. Congress is self-serving.

Ruden wryly takes us inside the “committee” that came up with the KJV, portraying how they settled on “faith, hope and charity” instead of “faith, hope and love” for 1 Corinthians 13:13. Picturing controversy in the room, perhaps as intense as the religious wars unfolding in those days, she admits how much she “admires” the spirit of compromise as those who knew “love” was better conceded ground to the “charity” advocates.

But then, and not wrongly, she dings their efforts and all the rest: “Most of what I see in English Bibles is loss: the loss of sound, the loss of literary imagery, the loss of emotion . . . the loss of thought and experience. The deep irony is that reverence—fear of God, deference to the religious community, reluctance to impose personal judgment on a sacred text—has the effect, over time, of flattening out the inspiring actual meanings.”

Acknowledging the “messy” process by which sacred texts were passed down orally, then written, then redacted and edited and confused many times, Ruden remains hopeful: “Abraham Lincoln held that God works through history, no matter how tragic, and I believe that God works through speaking, listening, reading, and writing, no matter how faulty.” And so she goes on translating.

The Face of Water contains some of the most sumptuous words about Bible words I've ever read. In these days when language is eviscerated, words are for sniping, eloquence is despised, and the possibility of speech meaning something true and

beautiful is in doubt, Ruden reminds us of the loveliness of language and the joy that sacred words can deliver.

A version of this article appears in the July 19 print edition under the title "Lo and behold."