THE TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLICAL WORD *SHOFAR*

DANIEL D. STUHLMAN

The word *shofar* in the Bible is used for an animal's horn. The first mention of the shofar is in Exodus, where a *very loud blast of the shofar* heralded the Lord's coming down on Sinai (Ex. 19:16). Later, in Leviticus, the shofar alerts Israel to the Jubilee year and its magnificent laws: *You shall make a proclamation with a blast of the shofar* (Lev. 25:9). Strangely, on the New Year, when the sounding of the shofar became a religious obligation, the term *shofar* is omitted, with the verse merely stating *In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe complete rest, a sacred occasion commemorated with a "loud blast"* [*zikhron teru'ah*] (Lev. 23:24).

Unlike the use of the shofar today, the horn in biblical times had several purposes – ritual (used in conjunction with holidays or worship), signal (used to send a message to the people or army) and musical (used to accompany singing or as a solo instrument). Some cases demonstrate a combination of purposes and for some the purpose is not clear. The announcement of the Jubilee year is an example of ritual use. In Joshua 6:3-5, God commands Joshua to circle the city of Jericho with the priests blowing the shofar. While the priests did the blowing, this was actually a military use of the shofar. Psalm 47:6 is an example of a musical use: *God ascends midst acclamation; the Lord, to the blasts of the shofar.*

When growing up we learned some Hebrew words that only had ritual meanings to us, but actually had more general meanings. For example, *bimah* only meant the platform where the rabbis sat or from which the Torah was read. I was surprised to learn that in Israeli Hebrew *bamah* is used for any stage, including the theaters used for performing arts. *Shofar* only meant the animal horn used for ritual purposes, Jewish law (*Halakhah*) describing its material and usage. The Talmud (*Rosh Ha-Shanah* 26a-b) also relates to the shofar solely as a ritual object, since by that time the shofar had no other function.

Translating the Tanakh does not simply entail taking the original Hebrew word and replacing it with an English term, but also understanding word

Daniel D. Stuhlman is a reference librarian at Wright College in Chicago, Illinois and an adjunct instructor for several graduate library schools. He earned a BHL, MHL and DHL in Bible. Visit his web site at http://Stuhlman.info.

connotations in different contexts. In a posting on H-Judaic, a listserv for Jewish studies,[1] a fellow scholar asked about the translation of the word *shofar* in the Bible. This scholar noted that Jewish translations usually rendered *shofar* as *horn* or *ram's horn*, while non-Jewish translations used *trumpet*. We will determine which translations are most appropriate. The following chart gives examples of the uses of *shofar* and its translation.[2]

.

VERSE IN BIBLE	TYPE	JPS (1917) /NJPS (1985)	WYCLIFF ENGLISH	LATIN
Exodus 19:16, 19	Signal[3]	Horn / Horn	Clarioun	Latin is bucinae unless noted
Exodus 20:15	Signal	Horn / Horn	Clarioun	
Leviticus 25:9	Ritual	Horn / Horn	Clarioun	
Joshua 6:4, 5,6, 8	Military signal	Ram's horns / Ram's horns or horns	Clariouns	tubae
Judges 7:16	Military signal	Horns / Ram's horns	Trumpis	
Judges 7:18	Military signal	Horn, horns / horns	Trumpe	tuba
I Samuel 13:37	Signal	Horn / Ram's horn	Clarioun	
II Samuel 2:28	Military signal	Horn / Horn	Clarioun	
II Samuel 6:15	Ritual	Horn / Horn	Trumpe	
II Kings 9:13	Signal	Horn / Horn	Trumpe	tuba
Isaiah 18:3	Signal, music	Horn / Ram's horn	Trumpe	tubae
Isaiah 27:13	Signal	Horn / Ram's horn	Trumpe	tuba
Jeremiah 4:5	Signal	Horn / Horn	Trumpe	tuba
Jeremiah 4:19	Military signal	Horn / Horns	Trumpe	
Jeremiah 6:1	Signal	Horn / Horn	Clarioun	
Jeremiah 42:14	Military signal	Horn / Horn	Trumpe	tubae

Robert Young, in his *Analytical Concordance to the Bible*, uses "trumpet" in all these places. Wycliff uses the indefinite article "a" while the JPS

versions use the definite article "the." The use of the definite article does not always match the Hebrew text. S. R. Hirsch in his German translation[4] of the Torah uses *Schofar* without a German equivalent. Hirsch translates *Ve-kol shofar hazak* (Ex. 19:16) as *starker Schofarton*.

HORNS, TRUMPETS AND CORNETS

All the brass instruments in use today trace their origins to instruments made from animal horns. The horns in ancient times were used for the same purposes as a shofar, i.e., signals, rituals, and music. Metal trumpets are at least as old as biblical times. In Numbers 10:1-10, God commands Moses to make two silver trumpets. These instruments were designed to assemble the community in military campaigns and on festivals. A silver trumpet found in the tomb of Tutankhamen was probably made for regal functions. Until the early 19th century brass instruments were limited in their role as musical instruments because they could not produce the full chromatic scale.

The word *trumpet* is a diminutive of *trumpe*, the word used in the Wycliff translation. In the medieval age of Wycliff and Chaucer the *trumpe* had two major purposes, ceremonial and as a military signal. *Trumpis* were used in the courts of noblemen to announce a special royal event. They were usually used in pairs or groups as described in Numbers 10:2, and later in the Temple. The sounds of the individual instruments were not the same. This was either to allow a wider range of notes, or due to the makers' inability to tune the instruments, or because the trumpet was associated with specific magical or ritual uses. The *clarioun* was a small instrument. Perhaps that is why the Wycliff translation uses both words. An army was more likely to carry a smaller portable horn than a long ceremonial *trumpe*.

Since the trumpets before 1814 (when valves were first used) could not produce the full chromatic scale of thirteen tones in an octave, composers of the Romantic and previous eras confined music for the trumpet to fanfares and filler type sounds. Trumpets in keys other than b-flat existed, but switching instruments in mid-piece was complicated. In the symphonies of Bach and Beethoven the trumpet's role was limited. For example, in the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, the trumpets have but five notes that imitate the melody of the strings. They are used as a fanfare. Compare this to the use of the trumpet in Verdi's opera *Aida*.[5] There, the trumpet in the

Grand March is a solo instrument with the orchestra muted in the background.

The cornet was invented in France in the 1820s. The root of cornet is *cor*, the French or Latin word for horn. It was designed as an instrument that could carry a melody alongside the strings and woodwinds. Since both the cornet and the trumpet are in the same musical key and the playing technique is identical, music can be played by either instrument. The relatively recent invention of the cornet means that we can rule out using *cornet* as a translation for *shofar*.

Clarioun[6] is a Middle English word (of Old French origin) for a musical instrument similar to a *trompe*, but smaller. The word *clarioun* appears in the Knight's Tale in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales,* but modern translations of Chaucer use "trumpet." *Clarioun* is a reasonable Middle English translation of *shofar* because the function is the same.

ETYMOLOGY OF SHOFAR

The etymology of the word *shofar* is generally understood to be based on the words *sippur* or *sapparu*, Assyrian for a species of goat. *Tsafir* – biblical Hebrew for a male goat – occurs in Daniel 8:5, 21. Although a folk etymology combines the two Hebrew words *shor* (ox) and *par* (bull) to produce *shofar*, a horn from these animals is not permitted to be used for a shofar according to Jewish law (Mishnah *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 3:2). The word *shofar* itself comes from the root *sh-p-r* which has the basic meaning of "hollowness" and in both biblical and modern Hebrew it also means "beautiful, fair or nice".[7]

I suggest that the word *shofar* is based on the onomatopoeia of the sound that is made when blowing the shofar. The /sh/ is the inhalation, the /o/ is the exhalation, the /f/ is the shaping of the lips for the sound and the /ar/ is the smooth ending of the sound. Compare this to the sound of the word *keren* meaning a bull's horn. The /k/ is an abrupt sound and the /n/ at the end is a full ending. *Keren* is not an open sound like the *teki'ah* of the shofar. The German and English word *horn* is a cognate of the Hebrew *keren*.[8]

These etymologies do not relate to the function of the *shofar* and therefore have no bearing on possible translations.

SUGGESTED TRANSLATIONS

Since the word *shofar* in the era of the Bible had connotations and uses that do not match current use of the word, translation is difficult. The words *horn, trumpet,* and *cornet* as used in modern English imply musical instruments, not ritual objects, even though in earlier times these instruments were used for other purposes. Using *ram's horn* as a translation suggests that the biblical *shofar* was made from the horn of a ram because of the connection with the *Akedah* (binding of Isaac) story in Genesis chapter 22, but this is not always correct. A shofar could in fact be made from several species of kosher animals. Furthermore, a shofar is as far removed from a raw animal horn as a trumpet is from a bunch of brass tubes. The manufacture of both instruments requires considerable expertise. My suggestion is to use the word *horn* when a shofar is employed as a non-ritual signal horn, *shofar* (untranslated, as by S.R. Hirsch) when it is used ritually, and *trumpet* whenever it is used musically. When the term *shofar* is employed, a footnote should explain why this word is not translated.

NOTES

1. H-JUDAIC Digest - 25 Feb. 2010 to 26 Feb. 2010 (#2010-44): "Query: Shofar in Bible translations." Received Feb. 26, 2010.

2. The verses are according to the Hebrew text. Wycliff's English version and Young's concordance are not always in agreement with the Hebrew text. Wycliff, the earliest English translation of the Bible, was completed in the late 1300s and made from the Latin (Vulgate) translation, not the original Hebrew. This list is truncated and includes sample entries. For the full list, with references in the rest of the Tanakh and the Aramaic Targum, see: http://home.earthlink.net/~byls-press/Table_for_shofar.pdf.

3. The examples from Exodus 19 and 20 are from the time of the giving of the Torah. The usage may also be considered ritual.

4. *Der Pentateuch übersetzt und erläutert von Samson Raphael Hirsch* (Frankfurt am Main: J. Kauffmann, 1899), vol. 2, p. 198.

5. *Aida,* composed by Giuseppe Verdi, was first performed at the Khedivial Opera House in Cairo on December 24, 1871.

6. Also spelled *clarin*, *claron*, and *clarion*, since Middle English spelling was not standardized.

7. Brown, Frances. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972 [first edition, 1907]); referred to as BDB. A fuller etymology was published in the blog, *Balashon - Hebrew Language Detective*, on Thursday, September 21, 2006, and may be retrieved from http://www.balashon.com/2006/09/shofar.html.

8. Hilpert, Joseph Leonhard and Ernst Friedrich Karcher. *A Dictionary of the English and German Language* (Carlsruhe: Th. Braun, 1857), 4 vols. Part 1, p. 573.