The Bible and Jewish Thought

Jewish thought, and naturally Jewish spirituality, has been shaped by the teachings and culture of Judaism and it is the Hebrew language that is the foundation of Jewish thinking. The rabbis spoke of Hebrew as the 'holy tongue' and saw it as the language of Torah that defines Judaism. The Zohar is a collection of writings that form the foundational work on Jewish mystical theology known as Kabbalah. According to the Zohar the holy tongue is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit (*Ruach haKodesh*) as it expresses and awakens the secrets of Torah (Scripture).

Western thought has been formed by Greek philosophy in which Plato played a dominant role. This Greek way of thinking searches for explanations and definitions as if issues, problems and items of knowledge could be put tidily in a box so that they could be defined and catalogued. The Hebrew, Middle Eastern way of thinking is different in that it does not insist on the same kind of precision. In fact, words can have multiple meanings to the extent that exact meaning can be elusive, and context has to be relied on to deliver an accurate meaning.

While it seems obvious that the scribes of the Hebrew books of the Bible wrote from an Eastern point of view and with an Eastern mindset, we moderns are unable, through general lack of skill and insight, to set aside our Western outlook based on centuries of Western philosophy.

One central characteristic of the Hebrew language is that abstract ideas are expressed in concrete terms. To put it another way, words with sensory connotations, i.e., related to one or more of the five senses, are used to paint word images. Consider the following verse from Jeremiah.

NRSV	Literal Translation
The anger of the Lord will not turn back until he has executed and accomplished the intents of his mind. Jeremiah 23:20	The nose of the Lord will not turn back until his doing and his establishing of the murmuring of his heart.

The idea is that the nose (*af*: אַף) flares and even changes colour with the emotion of anger. Anger is an abstract word and idea, but it is expressed concretely through the flaring of the nose/nostrils. So, 'nose' becomes the word for anger in ancient Hebrew.

Intents or intention is another abstract notion that cannot be perceived by the senses. So, the word whose root means murmuring is used. The analogy is to the murmuring (*zamam*: זמם) that might accompany the process of pondering, planning or devising a course of action.

The third abstract idea in this verse is 'mind', but in Hebraic thought the mind with its thinking and reflecting is centred on the heart (*lev*: לֵב), which is a concrete noun. Thoughts, reflections, considerations all come from the heart.

Here is another example from Jeremiah 11:20.

Four Modern Translations	Literal Translations
(You) who test the thoughts and the mind (JPS) Who try the heart and the mind (NRSV) You test people's thoughts and feelings (Good News) Who probe the loins and heart (Jerusalem Bible)	…Who test the kidneys and the heart

Hebrews regarded the kidneys (*kilyah/kilyot*: כליה) as the seat of emotions, that part of the inmost self that gives rise to emotions. In this verse of Jeremiah the reference is to God testing the emotions and thoughts of humans, their feelings (kidneys) and what is going on in their minds (heart).

These very brief examples alone can give us some idea of the difficulties facing translators of the Bible. In the above examples we can see the translators reaching out to find an adequate way of decoding the Hebrew while being faithful to the intention of the original writer. This should also allow us to see the futility of going to war over words or being wedded to a particular English translation. To conclude, it means there is no such thing as a perfect translation.