

# Exegesis and Translation

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## Part One Some Personal Reflexions

Since I first studied the Greek text of the Septuagint as a Christian monk, more than thirty five years ago, I have often reflected on matters pertaining to exegesis and translation. Four issues in particular have interested me during those decades.

1. How revealed religions, such as Christianity and Islam, and how certain spiritual ways [1], such as Buddhism and even Hinduism [2], are reliant on or have developed to become reliant upon certain texts, and how such dependant texts either by their nature require interpretation [3] or (more often) how interpretation is considered as necessary in order for the religion or spiritual way to gain support, influence, and adherents.
2. How many of those of faith - especially in revealed religions and almost certainly the majority of the faithful - have to rely on, and often quote, the translations of others; even if such people of faith are engaged in proselytizing.
3. How certain English words, used to interpret a particular Hebrew or Greek or Arabic word, suggest, represent, or have acquired, a particular meaning to English readers/listeners but which particular meaning may not necessary accurately reflect the meaning of the non-English word as that non-English word was possibly understood at the time it was included in a particular text.
4. How there seems to be, in revealed religions and most conventional spiritual ways, a rejection of *pathei-mathos* in favour of the wisdom said to be contained in the texts and thus in the teachings of the founder(s) of the religion/spiritual way, and - in the case of revealed religions - in the

writings/edicts of those who have been vested with or who have acquired a certain religious authority, and – also in the case of revealed religions – how such *pathei-mathos*, to be accepted at all, has to be judged by criteria developed from such texts and/or developed from interpretations of such texts.

### **Interpretation and The Question of Sin**

It is my view that in translations into English it is often best to avoid words that impose or seem to impose a meaning on an ancient text especially if the sense that an English word now imputes is the result of centuries of assumptions or opinions or influences and thus has acquired a modern meaning somewhat at variance with the culture, the milieu, of the time when the text that is being translated was written. Especially so in the matter of religious or spiritual texts where so many people rely or seem to rely on the translations, the interpretations, of others and where certain interpretations seem to have become fixed. [4]

Thus, it may be helpful if one can suggest, however controversial they may seem in their time, reasoned alternatives for certain words important for a specific and a general understanding of a particular text, and helpful because such alternatives might enable a new appreciation of such a text, as if for instance one is reading it for the first time with the joy of discovery.

One of the prevalent English words used in translations of the New Testament, and one of the words now commonly associated with revealed religions such as Christianity and Islam, is sin. A word which now imputes and for centuries has imputed a particular and at times somewhat strident if not harsh moral attitude, with sinners starkly contrasted with the righteous, the saved, and with sin, what is evil, what is perverse, to be shunned and shudderingly avoided.

One of the oldest usages of the word sin – so far discovered – is in the c. 880 CE translation of the c. 525 CE text *Consolatio Philosophiae*, a translation attributed to King Ælfred. Here, the Old English spelling of *syn* is used:

Þæt is swiðe dyslic & swiðe micel syn þæt mon þæs wenan scyle  
be Gode

The context of the original Latin of Boethius [5] is *cogitare*, in relation to a dialogue about goodness and God, so that the sense of the Latin is that it is incorrect – an error, wrong – to postulate/claim/believe certain things about God. There is thus here, in Boethius, as in early English texts such as *Beowulf* [6], the sense of doing what was wrong, of committing an error, of making a mistake, of being at fault; at most of overstepping the bounds, of transgressing limits imposed by others, and thus being 'guilty' of such an infraction, a sense which the suggested etymology of the word *syn* implies: from the Latin *sons, sontis*.

Thus, this early usage of the English word *syn* seems to impart a sense somewhat different from what we now associate with the word *sin*, which is

why in my translation of John, 8.7 [7] I eschewed that much overused and pejorative word in order to try and convey something of the numinous original:

So, as they continued to ask [for an answer] he straightened himself, saying to them: Let he who has never made a mistake [Αναμαρτητος ] throw the first stone at her.

ὡς δὲ ἐπέμενον ἐρωτῶντες αὐτόν, ἀνέκυψεν καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· ὁ ἀναμάρτητος ὑμῶν πρῶτος ἐπ' αὐτὴν βαλέτω λίθον.

Jesus here is not, in my view, sermonizing about sin, as a puritan preacher might, and as if he is morally superior to and has judged the sinners. Instead, he is rather gently and as a human pointing out an obvious truth about our human nature; explaining, in v.11, that he has not judged her conduct:

ἢ δὲ εἶπεν· οὐδεὶς, κύριε. εἶπεν δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς· οὐδὲ ἐγὼ σε κατακρίνω· πορεύου, ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν μηκέτι ἀμάρτανε

[And] she answered, No one, my Lord. Whereupon Jesus replied Neither do I judge [κατακρίνω] you, therefore go, and avoid errors such as those. [8]

Such a translation avoids the rather contradictory nature of most other translations which have Jesus clearly stating that he also does not judge her but then have him go on to say that she should 'sin no more' with the obvious implication that he has indeed judged her in that in his judgement she had indeed sinned before.

Understood and appreciated thus, sans the now culturally-biased word sin, these passages from the gospel according to John - together with passages such as Luke 19.10 and Romans 13.10 [9] - perhaps usefully summarize the evangel of Jesus of Nazareth; the (in my view) rather human message of avoiding judging others because we ourselves are prone to error, the message of love, and the message of redemption (forgiveness) for those who in the past have made mistakes but who have thereafter tried to avoid making such mistakes again, those hitherto perhaps damaged or lost.

In respect of ἀμαρτάνω [10] consider, for example, Matthew 18.21:

Τότε προσελθὼν ὁ Πέτρος εἶπεν [αὐτῷ] Κύριε, ποσάκις ἀμαρτήσῃ εἰς ἐμὲ ὁ ἀδελφός μου καὶ ἀφήσω αὐτῷ; ἕως ἑπτάκις

Peter then approached [προσέρχομαι] him saying My Lord, how often [ποσάκις] may my brother fail [ἀμαρτάνω] me and be ignored [ἀφήμι]? Up to seven times?

Which is somewhat different from the usual "how many times shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him."

## **Ontology, Exegesis, and Pathei-Mathos**

All religions and spiritual ways, because they are spiritual/metaphysical, either posit, or are interpreted as positing, an ontology. That is, they all offer an explanation, or an analysis, of the nature of our being as humans and of the nature of, and our relation to, Being, whether Being is understood as God/Allah/gods/Nature/Fate or in terms of axioms such as karma and nirvana. There thus exists, or there develops, an explanation or explanations concerning the meaning and the purpose of our mortal lives; of how that purpose may be attained; and thus of what wisdom is and why there is and continues to be suffering.

However, as I mentioned in *Questions of Good, Evil, Honour, and God*, citing several examples, the original message of a revelation or of a spiritual way often seems to become obscured or somehow gets lost over centuries. A loss or obscuration partly due to the reliance on revealed or given texts; partly due to divergent interpretations of such texts, with some interpretations accepted or rejected by those assuming or vested with a religious authority; and partly due to a reliance, by many of the faithful, on translations of such texts.

Furthermore, the interpretation of such religious texts - and/or the emergence or the writing of new texts concerning a particular spiritual way - has often led to schism or schisms, and to harsh interpretations of religions; schisms and a harshness that have sometimes led to sects, to violence between believers and sects, to accusations of heresy, and to the persecution of those said to be heretics. All of which have thus caused or been the genesis of suffering.

Thus, in respect of Christianity,

"...it is tempting therefore to suggest that it was later, and theological, interpretations and interpolations which led to a harsh dichotomy, an apocalyptic eschatology, a 'war' between an abstract 'good' and 'evil', and that with such interpretations and interpolations - much in evidence in the persecution of alleged heretics - the simple gospel message of the health of love was somehow lost for a while, to be, later on, re-expressed by people such as William Penn, who wrote, in his *Some Fruits of Solitude*, Let us then try what love can do." [11]

In effect, the humility that I have found by experience that all or most religions and spiritual ways manifest - and an essential part of their revelation, their message, their presencing of the numinous - is obscured or ignored in favour of arrogant human presumptions and assumptions and a personal pride: that 'we' know better, or believe we know better; that 'we' have somehow found or been given the 'right' answer(s) or the 'right' interpretation(s), and that therefore 'the others' are wrong, and 'we' are better or more 'pure'/devout than them. And so on.

Yet there is, it seems to me, after many years of reflexion, something else

which accounts for why this loss of a necessary humility occurs, other than the aforementioned reliance on revealed or given texts, the divergent interpretations of such texts, and the reliance, by many of the faithful, on translations of such texts. This is the reality of religions and many spiritual ways either rejecting *pathei-mathos* as a source of wisdom or favouring specific texts and their interpretation(s) over and above the *pathei-mathos* of individuals.

For *pathei-mathos* - the personal learning from grief, suffering, pain, adversity, and experience - directly connects us to and thus enables us to personally experience and appreciate the numinous, sans words, ideations, ideology, theology, and dogma. An experience and an appreciation outwardly and inwardly manifest in a personal humility; in the knowledge of ourselves as but one fallible, mortal, fragile, human emanation of and connexion to Being; and in an empathic understanding of how all religions and spiritual ways, in their genesis and in their original emanations, express - or try to express - the same wisdom: manifest in an appreciation of the numinous, and in our human necessity for the natural balance that is humility and a very personal honour. And, because of this spiritual and religious equivalence, it does not matter if the individual of *pathei-mathos*, having so touched and felt the numinous, develops their own *weltanschauung* or none, or leaves or finds an existing spiritual or religious one, although it is and often has been such *pathei-mathos* which reveals to individuals, or which enables them to rediscover, the essence of a particular religion or a particular spiritual way: that simple and similar numinous essence which schisms, harsh interpretations, dogma, and ideology, have so often and for so long obscured.

For what *pathei-mathos* reveals does matter, beyond such outward and such supra-personal manifestations, are the personal, the individual, virtues of love, empathy, gentleness, and compassion.

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## Notes

[1] As outlined in Appendix II (Glossary of Terms and Greek Words) of *The Numinous Way of Pathei-Mathos* (2013) I make a distinction between a religion and a spiritual Way of Life.

One of the differences being that a religion requires and manifests a codified ritual and doctrine and a certain expectation of conformity in terms of doctrine and ritual, as well as a certain organization beyond the local community level resulting in particular individuals assuming or being appointed to positions of authority in matters relating to that religion. In contrast, Ways are more diverse and more an expression of a spiritual ethos, of a customary, and often localized, way of doing certain spiritual things, with there generally being little or no organization beyond the community level and no individuals assuming - or being

appointed by some organization - to positions of authority in matters relating to that ethos.

Religions thus tend to develop an organized regulatory and supra-local hierarchy which oversees and appoints those, such as priests or religious teachers, regarded as proficient in spiritual matters and in matters of doctrine and ritual, whereas adherents of Ways tend to locally and informally and communally, and out of respect and a personal knowing, accept certain individuals as having a detailed knowledge and an understanding of the ethos and the practices of that Way. Many spiritual Ways have evolved into religions.

[2] In Buddhism, the primary texts are regarded as: (i) for Theravada Buddhism, the collections referred to as *Tipitaka/Tripitaka*; (ii) for Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Tipitaka (in some cases, depending on interpretation) and the various *Sutras*, including the collection often referred to as The Perfection of Wisdom; (iii) for Tibetan Buddhism, the various Tantric texts, plus some of the Tipitaka (in some cases, depending on interpretation) and some the Mahāyāna sutras (in some cases, depending on interpretation).

In Hinduism, there is the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the literature of the *Vedas*.

[3] By *interpretation* here is meant (i) commentaries (academic, theological, and otherwise); (ii) explanations (critical, and otherwise); (iii) translations; and - most importantly - (iv) a seeking of the meaning of (a) both the text (in whole and in parts) and (b) of the words and terms used.

[4] One misused English word is 'terror', often used to translate **الرُّعْبَ** in Ayah 151 of Surah Al 'Imran. See Part Two, *Translation and Al-Quran*.

As I noted there:

My, admittedly fallible, view now - after some years of reflexion and study - is that, in an English interpretation of the meaning of a work as revered, and misunderstood, as the Quran, English words in common usage must be carefully chosen, with many common words avoided, and that it would sometimes be better to choose an unusual or even archaic word in order to try and convey something of the sense of the Arabic. Thus, with a careful interpretation common misunderstandings of the text - by non-Muslims unversed in Arabic - can possibly be avoided, especially if - as might be the case with unusual words - the reader has to pause to consider the meaning or make the effort to find the meaning, if only in a glossary appended to the interpretation. A pause and/or an effort that is suited to reading a work revered by millions of people around the world.

[5] Quare quod a summo bono diversum est sui natura, id summum bonum non est; quod nefas est de eo cogitare, quo nihil constat esse praestantius. *Consolatio Philosophiae*, Liber Tertius, pr. x

[6] Beowulf, 2470f, where the spelling *synn* is used:

eaferum læfde, swa deð eadig mon,  
lond ond leodbyrig, þa he of life gewat.  
þa wæs *synn* ond sacu Sweona ond Geata  
ofer wid wæter, wroht gemæne,  
herenið hearda, syððan Hreðel swealt

[7] qv. Myatt, *Fifty Years of Diverse Peregrinations*. 2013

[8] The conventional interpretation of ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν μηκέτι ἀμάρτανε is "from now on sin no more".

[9] Luke 19.10:

ἦλθεν γὰρ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ζητῆσαι καὶ σῶσαι τὸ ἀπολωλός

The arrivance [ἔρχομαι] of the Son of Man was to seek and to save what was lost

However, a more interesting interpretation is:

The arrivance of the Son of Man was to seek and to repair [σῶζω] what had been damaged [ἀπόλλυμι]

and which interpretation is suggested by (i) the sense of σῶζω: keep safe, preserve, maintain - whence repair, and (ii) the sense of ἀπόλλυμι: destroy, ruin, kill, demolish, and - metaphorically - damaged, lost, and die.

Romans 13.10:

ἡ ἀγάπη τῷ πλησίον κακὸν οὐκ ἐργάζεται· πλήρωμα οὖν νόμου ἡ ἀγάπη

love brings no harm to the neighbour; love is the completion of the law

[11] ἀμαρτάνω implies a failure, mistake, an error, deprivation, loss, to miss/fail. qv (i) Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*:

ὅταν ταχύς τις οὐπιβουλεύων λάθρα  
χωρῆ, ταχὺν δεῖ κάμει βουλεύειν πάλιν:  
εἰ δ' ἡσυχάζων προσμενῶ, τὰ τοῦδε μὲν  
πεπραγμέν' ἔσται, τάμὰ δ' ἡμαρτημένα 621

But when there is a plot against me which is swiftly and furtively  
Moving forward, then I must be swift in opposing that plot  
Since if I remain at rest, then indeed  
What is about to be done, will be - because of my mistake.

and (ii) Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*:

ὀφλῶν γὰρ ἀρπαγῆς τε καὶ κλοπῆς δίκην

τοῦ ῥυσίου θ' ἤμαρτε καὶ πανώλεθρον 535  
αὐτόχθονον πατρῶον ἔθρισεν δόμον.

The penalty for the pillage and theft was fair -  
He lost his booty and completely ruined  
His own land with his father's family cut down

[11] Myatt. *Questions of Good, Evil, Honour, and God*. 2013

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## Part Two Translation and Al-Quran

The problem of sometimes projecting modern interpretations onto ancient texts by the injudicious use, in a translation, of a particular English word is especially relevant in the matter of the Quran, for it seems to be increasingly common for someone reliant on translations - on the interpretations of meaning given by others - to misunderstand the text of the Quran and then, from that misunderstanding, not only form a misconceived (and sometimes prejudiced) opinion about the Quran in particular and Islam in general but also to give voice to such an opinion.

For example, an ayah [verse] often (mis)quoted is Ayah 151 of Surah Al 'Imran, which is usually interpreted as "Soon shall we cast terror into the hearts of the unbelievers."

However, the word 'terror' is an inappropriate interpretation for several reasons. The Arabic of Ayah 151 of Surah Al 'Imran is:

سَنُلْقِي فِي قُلُوبِ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا الرُّعْبَ بِمَا أَشْرَكُوا بِاللَّهِ مَا لَمْ يُنَزَّلْ بِهِ سُلْطَانًا وَمَأْوَاهُمُ  
النَّارُ وَبِئْسَ مَثْوَى الظَّالِمِينَ

Does الرُّعْبُ imply 'terror' as the aforementioned interpretation suggests, along with all that the modern English word terror now implies, as in the difficult to define term terrorism? No, it does not; rather, the Arabic implies *the fear/the dread* and 'the astonishment/awe' - that is, that human feeling inspired by apprehending or experiencing some-thing supernaturally or extraordinarily powerful and numinous; for example, an Ayah (Sign) of Allah, Al-Khaliq, Al-Azim, Al-Jalil. The kind of fear/trembling/awe/astonishment felt, for instance and importantly, by the Apostles when, as recounted in Luke 24.37, they witnessed Jesus alive after the crucifixion.

That is, I suggest that what is referred to in Ayah 151 of Surah Al 'Imran - as in the other four Ayat where الرُّعْبُ / رُعْبًا occur - is similar to the 'suffusion with fear' and the 'being scared' that occurs and has occurred, as recounted in both Christian scripture and the Quran, when a mortal is (a) confronted by God/Allah or some-thing divine/numinous/awe-inspiring, and/or (b) has such



fear, and such a being scared, thrust into their hearts by God/Allah, as a Sign, a warning, or as mention of their fate.

In respect of Luke 24.37, for instance, the Greek text is:

πτοηθέντες δὲ καὶ ἔμφοβοι γενόμενοι ἐδόκουν πνεῦμα θεωρεῖν

The term *ἔμφοβος* means 'suffused with/by phobos' - held/gripped by fear; timorous - and occurs in Sirach 19.24 and Luke 24.5, the latter of which is very interesting: ἐμόφβων δὲ γενομένων αὐτῶν καὶ κλινουσῶν τὰ πρόσωπα εἰς τὴν γῆν εἶπαν πρὸς αὐτάς Τί ζητεῖτε τὸν ζῶντα μετὰ τῶν νεκρῶν. That is, suffused with phobos, they assumed a posture of submission/reverence /respect by bowing their heads; in effect prostrating themselves in the presence of some-thing divine/numinous/awe-inspiring. Since πνεῦμα - pneuma - implies apparition or ghost, and πτοηθεντες suggests they were 'scared' (cf. Odyssey 22.298 - τῶν δὲ φρένες ἐπτοίηθεν) then Luke 24.37 could be translated as "But they, suffused with fear and scared, felt that they saw an apparition." [1]

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In the matter of Ayah 151 of Surah Al 'Imran, a possible interpretation of meaning therefore is:

Into the hearts of they who disbelieve We shall hurl redurre because they, without any authority revealed about such things, associate others with Allah; and for their home: The Fire, that harrowing resting place of the unjust.

Here, I have used the unusual English word redurre, with a meaning of 'awe combined with a trembling fear'. A word suggested by its occurrence in religious works by Richard Rolle and John Gower, and also by texts such as Morte Arthure [2] and which word therefore places this Ayah from the Quran into the correct context, which is that of a religious revelation, a spiritual message, comparable to that of Christianity, and of the particular ontology that Islam offers as answers to questions concerning the meaning and the purpose of our mortal lives; of how that purpose may be attained; and thus of what wisdom is. Answers which have nothing whatsoever to do with 'terrorism', or even with 'terror' as that word is now commonly understood.

## The Art of Translation, and A Question About Time

One question of possibly projecting modern interpretations onto ancient texts by the injudicious use of a particular English word, occurred to me some twenty years ago during my translation of the Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles, and concerned the Greek word χρόνος. This is almost always translated as 'time', a word we now associate with a regular linearity - of past-present-future - measured in terms of the minutes, hours, and fixed days, of a reliable timepiece such as a watch or clock.

In the classical world of Homer and Sophocles, this type of reliable, linear, regularity was almost unknown, with χρόνος thus sometimes denoting some ill-defined period - long or short - and with the passing of a year, for example, often determined by the changes of the seasons, and which seasons themselves were marked in their arrival by the appearance of certain constellations in the night sky, something beautifully expressed by Aeschylus at the beginning of the Agamemnon:

θεοὺς μὲν αἰτῶ τῶνδ' ἀπαλλαγὴν πόνων  
φρουρᾶς ἑτείας μῆκος, ἦν κοιμώμενος  
στέγαις Ἀτρειδῶν ἄγκαθεν, κυνὸς δίκην,  
ἄστρον κάτοιδα νυκτέρων ὀμήγουρι,  
καὶ τοὺς φέροντας χειῖμα καὶ θέρος βροτοῖς  
λαμπροὺς δυνάστας, ἐμπρέποντας αἰθέρι  
ἀστέρας, ὅταν φθίνωσιν, ἀντολὰς τε τῶν.  
καὶ νῦν φυλάσσω λαμπάδος τό σύμβολον,  
αὐγὴν πυρὸς φέρουσαν ἐκ Τροίας φάτιν  
ἀλώσιμόν τε βᾶξιν: ὧδε γὰρ κρατεῖ  
γυναικὸς ἀνδρόβουλον ἐλπίζον κέαρ.

Again I have asked the gods to deliver me from this toil,  
This vigil a year in length, where I repose  
On Atreidae's roof on my arms, as is the custom with dogs  
Looking toward the nightly assembly of constellations  
And they who bring to mortals the storm-season and the summer:  
Those radiant sovereigns, distinguished in the heavens  
As stars when they come forth or pass away.  
And still I keep watch for the sign of the beacon,  
The light of the fire which will bring report of Troy,  
Announcing it is captured.  
For such is the command  
And expectation of that woman with a man's resolve.

However, in Oedipus Tyrannus, Sophocles has the memorable phrase καὶ μ' ἦμαρ ἤδη ξυμμετρούμενον χρόνω, indicating something not only about χρόνος but also about the classical world and (importantly) about the character of Oedipus. The phrase is therefore worth quoting in context:

ὦ παῖδες οἰκτροί, γνωτὰ κοῦκ ἄγνωτά μοι  
προσήλθεθ' ἰμείροντες: εὖ γὰρ οἶδ' ὅτι

νοσεῖτε πάντες, καὶ νοσοῦντες, ὡς ἐγὼ  
οὐκ ἔστιν ὑμῶν ὅστις ἐξ ἴσου νοσεῖ.  
τὸ μὲν γὰρ ὑμῶν ἄλγος εἰς ἓν ἔρχεται  
μόνον καθ' αὐτὸν κούδέν' ἄλλον, ἢ δ' ἐμὴ  
ψυχὴ πόλιν τε κάμει καὶ σ' ὁμοῦ στένει.  
ὥστ' οὐχ ὑπνώ γ' εὐδοντά μ' ἐξεγείρετε,  
ἀλλ' ἴστε πολλὰ μὲν με δακρύσαντα δῆ,  
πολλὰς δ' ὁδοὺς ἐλθόντα φροντίδος πλάνοις:  
ἦν δ' εὐ σκοπῶν ἠῦρισκον ἴασι μόνην,  
ταύτην ἔπραξα: παῖδα γὰρ Μενοικέως  
Κρέοντ', ἐμαυτοῦ γαμβρόν, ἐς τὰ Πυθικὰ  
ἔπεμψα Φοίβου δώμαθ', ὡς πύθοιθ' ὅ τι  
δρῶν ἢ τί φωνῶν τήνδε ῥυσαίμην πόλιν.  
καί μ' ἤμαρ ἤδη ξυμμετρούμενον χρόνῳ 73  
λυπεῖ τί πράσσει: τοῦ γὰρ εἰκότος πέρα  
ἄπεστι πλείω τοῦ καθήκοντος χρόνου.  
ὅταν δ' ἴκηται, τηνικαῦτ' ἐγὼ κακὸς  
μὴ δρῶν ἂν εἶην πάνθ' ὅσ' ἂν δηλοῖ θεός.

You, my children, who lament - I know, for I am not without  
knowledge,  
Of the desire which brings you here. For well do I see  
All your sufferings - and though you suffer, it is I  
And not one of you that suffers the most.  
For your pain comes to each of you  
By itself, with nothing else, while my psyche  
Mourns for myself, for you and the clan.  
You have not awakened me from a resting sleep  
For indeed you should know of my many tears  
And the many paths of reflection I have wandered upon and tried.  
And, as I pondered, I found one cure  
Which I therefore took. The son of Menoecus,  
Creon - he who is my kin by marriage - I have sent to that Pythian  
dwelling  
Of Phoebus to learn how I  
By word or deed can give deliverance to the clan.  
But I have already measured the duration  
And am concerned: for where is he? He is longer than expected  
For his absence is, in duration, greater than is necessary.  
Yet when he does arrive, it would dishonourable  
For me not to act upon all that the gods makes clear.

vv.58-77

To translate χρόνος in v.73 abstractly as 'time' is therefore to overlook not only the context - of a world where the seasons were often determined by observation of the night sky - but also the significance of what Oedipus says. For he has, out of his urgent concern for both his people and himself - out of fear of the wrake of the gods - gone to the trouble to determine how long Creon's journey should take and to measure/calculate/record, or to have

someone do this for him, precisely how long Creon has been away.

A pedantic point, possibly; but one which perhaps illustrates the engaging art of translation and the possibilities of interpretation, and of misinterpretation, that exist.

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### Notes

[1] On a pedantic note, I understand δοκέω as meaning here not the conventional unemotional 'suppose/thought' nor (worse) 'opinion' but rather as 'felt' in the sense of experiencing (as they do) an intense and personal feeling. Hence my rendering that they "felt that they saw..."

[2] John Gower, *Confessio Amantis* [written 1390 ce]

That thogh thi love more drawe  
And peise in the balance more,  
Thou miht noght axe ayein therfore  
Of duete, bot al of grace.  
For love is lord in every place,  
Ther mai no lawe him justefie  
Be reddour ne be compaignie,  
That he ne wole after his wille  
Whom that him liketh spede or spille

(Book 5, v. 4558) *The Complete Works of John Gower*.  
Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899-1902

Morte Arthure [written c. 1400 ce]

That thow ne schall rowte ne ryste vndyr the heuene ryche,  
Pofe thow for reddour of Rome ryne to þe erthe [108-109]

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Illumination from the MS Anicii Manlii Torqvati Severini Boetii,  
De Consolatione Philosophiae cum Commento,  
dated c. 1385 ce, in Glasgow University library: MS Hunter 374 fol.4r

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