

# An Unknown Exegete: Uncovering the Biblical Theology of Elizabeth Barrett Browning<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The present essay provides a survey of a previously unexplored, formative period in the life of the famed Victorian English poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning (EBB). Her personal Bibles (Hebrew, LXX, and Greek New Testament), held in The Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary/Columbia University, have been discovered to contain Barrett Browning's own extensive handwritten notes. These notes demonstrate that EBB read extensively among the biblical exegetes and scholars of the day, many of whom influenced her reading of the text. The essay considers the life circumstances in which she devoted herself to these studies, an overview of her marginalia in these volumes, and some suggestions on how Browning's biblical studies may have influenced her later poetic works.

## Introduction

In recent years, the study of Elizabeth Barrett Browning<sup>2</sup> has blossomed, with publications of various biographical studies on her life and aspects relating to her intellectual growth and spiritual formation.<sup>3</sup> Much of the Barrett Browning scholarship focuses on two periods in her life, either that period of her youth, especially during the publication of her first major work, *The Battle of Marathon*, at the age of fourteen in 1819, or her work after 1836, which many would consider her time of most mature artistry. Some excellent scholarship has been conducted on the role of Christianity, Swedenborgianism, and Greek thought in Barrett Browning's works, but there has been comparatively little inquiry into the exegetical nuances of her work with the Biblical text, outside of what she discloses in letters or diary entries.

This present essay examines the marginalia, notes, and comments made by Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her personal Bibles — a two-volume Hebrew Bible published in 1750, and a single-volume Greek Septuagint (LXX) and New

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<sup>1</sup> Manuscript notes and marginalia in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's hand are found in her personal Bibles, both in the source languages of Hebrew and Greek and in English. In the cover of the Greek Septuagint (LXX) and New Testament, beside a few scraps of notes written by the poet, is the tiny quill pen she used to write these exegetical notes in extreme minuscule handwriting. Abbreviations: E.V. English Version, S.V. Standard Version, LXX: Septuagint.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article the use of "EBB" is employed to describe the main subject of this research. It should be noted that it may designate "Elizabeth Barrett Browning" for practical recognition purposes, but more accurately, her maiden name which was also initialized "EBB" to abbreviate "Elizabeth Barrett Barrett," which describes the name of our subject at the time of her annotating these Bibles.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Barbara Dennis. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Hope End Years* (Wales: Poetry Wales Press, 1996); Linda M. Lewis. *Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Spiritual Progress: Face to Face with God* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998); Mary Jane Lupton, "A Little Hemming and More Greek," in *Critical Essays on Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Sandra Donaldson (New York: G.K. Hall, 1999); and Alexandra M.B. Wörn, "'Poetry is Where God is': The Importance of Christian Faith and Theology in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Life and Work," in *Victorian Religious Discourse: New Directions in Criticism*, ed. Jude V. Nixon, 2004.

Testament published in London in 1828.<sup>4</sup> We will examine the breadth, variety, intensity, and peculiarity of Elizabeth Barrett's exegetical studies by analyzing her use of Hebrew and Greek vocabularies, as well as her commentaries on various Biblical texts. It will be argued that Elizabeth Barrett's intense study of scriptures in their original tongues during the first half of 1833 may have found their impetus in several key events starting in 1828, including the death of her mother, the intense upheaval and subsequent trauma of the loss of her family and childhood home, Hope End, Hertfordshire, around September 1832, and ongoing tension with her academic tutor, Mr. Boyd, with whom she shared many of her intellectual interests and scholarly pursuits. The period of EBB's life that is of particular interest here is between 1832-33. This essay aims at revealing greater detail of Elizabeth Barrett's intellectual and spiritual development at this time.

## Her Life and Studies

The more one delves deeply into the life, loves, education, and writings of EBB, the more astonishing and powerful her story becomes. Yet for many years she was overshadowed by her husband Robert, also a famed poet, and her work with ancient languages was effectively ignored. EBB was both talented and brilliant, with a drive to understand texts, and create magnificent works of literary art. Between 1817 and 1820, she studied Greek with Daniel McSwiney, along with her brother.<sup>5</sup> It becomes ever more clear that EBB was deeply read in the early Christian writers, as she commonly cites them in her inscriptions throughout these Bibles. In the frontispiece of the LXX Genesis, she copies a Greek text, which appears so be from S. Basil, and later she writes specifically about Gregory Nazianzus<sup>6</sup> and John Chrysostom.<sup>7</sup> There is no question that her studies in the classical and biblical languages equipped her for serious textual studies of the sacred texts, and as one digs more thoroughly into her notes, it is clear how devoted she was to her work, and how well she knew these languages. We will look at both the linguistic nature of her work and the likely sources of her exegetical studies, many of which were scholarly publications from the early nineteenth century.

## The Provenance of Her Bibles

On March 27, 1923, the library of Union Theological Seminary (renamed The Burke Library in 1983) received a gift from Mrs. Frederick Ferris Thompson of approximately eighty Bibles, ranging in age from the Medieval to the Modern Era. Among the many treasured and valuable Bibles were curious volumes inscribed with seemingly illegible markings. Mrs. Thompson died only a few months after her gift to the Union Seminary Library, but her gifts remain to this day, and are highly valued. And though they have been cataloged and made accessible to researchers for nearly a century, the depths of their riches have yet to be understood or shared with the scholarly world. Some research in the late 1990s

<sup>4</sup> The full title of these volumes are *Biblia Hebraica Sine Punctis Acc. Nat. Forster, Oxon* (1750) and *Vetus Testamentum secundum Septuaginta Seniorum interpretationem juxta exemplar vaticanum summa cura denuo recusum; adjiciuntur editionis Brabianae variae lectiones. Londini: Sumptibus Samuelis Bagster, 15, Paternoster Row, MDCCCXXXVIII.*

<sup>5</sup> See Avery and Scott Chronology, 215-217.

<sup>6</sup> Notes located at the end of the entire Greek Bible discuss Gregory Nazianzus. EBB writes:

“Gregory Nazianzus has written four short poems enumerating the miracles of the savior recorded in the four gospels, the transfiguration is mentioned; the resurrection is mentioned, and if Gregory had believed that any miraculous change of the elements had taken place at the institution of the Lord's supper, would not that have been also mentioned? It seems to me that his silence upon this point, brings decisive evidence of the nature of his opinion upon it.” [NB: This is written in ink, while the following notes are in pencil.]

Followed in the back pages by a comment on infant baptism and John Chrysostom:

“Infant Baptism in the 4th Century.

Chrysostom in an oration, preserved by [Georgius], Bishop of Alexandria in his life of Chrysostom, speaks of a letter written to him during his [...], by the S[...] Sudonica. Those words are [...]ded....” [Greek text follows] etc.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Ricks, *The Brownings: Letters and Poetry* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1970), 155. See her poem *Wine of Cyprus*, which is addressed to her tutor H.S. Boyd, especially stanzas XIV-XVI, where these Patristic authors are specifically mentioned in the poem.

yielded partial revelations, but these scholarly contributions only touched the surface, and did not engage with the Greek and Hebrew texts involved.<sup>8</sup>

The provenance of the Barrett Browning Bibles can be traced back to Mr. Frederick Ferris Thompson, Mrs. Thompson's husband, the initial collector of the Bibles, who had spent several years collecting Bibles in Europe. It is known that he acquired a rare First Edition King James Bible from the well-known Jewish scholar and bibliophile Christian David Ginsberg (1831-1914), sometime before the mid-1890s. It is very likely that during Thompson's travels, he happened upon either a seller or acquaintance who knew of Robert Browning's estate, as Robert died in 1889, and it is very likely that EBB's effects, including her Bibles, were among his possessions.

## Her Grasp and Use of Biblical Languages

There are some indications in of language proficiency in EBB's poetry that reflect her deeper learning of Hebrew and Greek. Some of these may be found in a handful of works, including *The Measure — Hymn IV*, *Hector in the Garden*, and *Wine of Cyprus*, for example. Though these are offerings of how she employed these languages, there is room for deeper study and interpretation by scholars interested in her language studies. For instance, in *The Measure — Hymn IV*, she uses the word "Shalish" (see Hebrew: שליש),<sup>9</sup> meaning "measure," and which appears in both Isaiah 40 and Psalm 80.<sup>10</sup> In the latter poems, she uses Greek terms to create bilingual sonority—the fourth line of stanza fourteen of *Hector in the Garden* reads in a rhyming fashion: "Did his mouth speak — naming **Troy**/ With an **ὀτοτοτοτοῖ**!"<sup>11</sup> And later in *Wine of Cyprus*, she writes:

Swept the sheep's-bell's tinkling **noise**,  
While a girlish voice was reading,  
Somewhat low for **αῖ's and οῖ's**.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to discern what many works like these mean, especially as new elements of scholarship are gradually introduced, discussed, and researched. Further studies will be needed to shed light on any connections between her studies of the classical languages and her subsequent use of these languages in her poetry.

## Her Exegetical Notes

This present examination of EBB's Bibles will be by no means comprehensive, as her notations are too extensive to permit full attention to in a single overview such as this.

A brief look at her Greek Septuagint will provide at least some suggestions. EBB's New Testament is highly annotated and in very small script, at times almost illegible. Because of the density of this material, it will not be treated in the present essay, but will be the subject of a subsequent article.

We will be looking at what constitutes the most integral and important indications of EBB's exegetical practices, specifically noting and underscoring how EBB engaged with the biblical texts in Hebrew and Greek. Such descriptions as notation frequency, exegetical word choice, and comparative lexical terminologies between Greek and Hebrew will help us understand her approach to biblical texts.

<sup>8</sup> See Lisa Fishman, *Current*. (Anderson, SC: Parlor Press), 2011. Especially interesting and relevant are pp. 39-82, where Fishman, an accomplished poet based in Chicago, extracted dozens of marginal notes from the EBB bibles and turned them into a series of poems.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Ricks, ed. *The Brownings: Letters and Poetry* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1970), 136.

<sup>10</sup> See Isaiah 40:12 — תִּכְנֶן גָּבֹל־בְּשֵׁלֶשׁ עֶפְרָהּ אֲרָץ and Psalm 80:5 — תִּשְׁקֶמוּ בְּדַמְעוֹת שְׁלִישׁ; (variously translated "in large or great measure"). Though it may be argued that EBB used this word, as other foreign or biblical words for their sound and consonance within poetical measures, this word may have been chosen to express sound *and* meaning in her poetry.

<sup>11</sup> Ricks, *The Brownings*, 161.

<sup>12</sup> Ricks, *The Brownings*, 153. See *Wine of Cyprus*, IX. My emphasis on the Greek endings: αῖ's and οῖ's. See also her poem "Night and the Merry Man" lines 108-9, which read "Flowers, encolor'd with the sun/ And αῖ αῖ written upon none;/" in *The Complete Poetical Works of Mrs. Browning* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1900), 40.

It is worth asking then “Why, *at this time*, does she begin to read the biblical texts in the original languages?” There are a series of intriguing events that invite such a question. Though no conclusive answer may be reached, the evidence of certain events points to some combined sense of EBB’s inner searching, deep and life-long commitment to learning and curiosity, her scholarly rigor, and devotion to the Bible; this last point for EBB could only be thoroughly understood by studying the original tongues.

Contemporary scholars must be highly cautious of even suggesting anything emotive of subjects in former times, yet aside from the loss of the family home in 1832, a question ought to be considered regarding the state of the relationship and friendship between EBB and her tutor around the time she begins annotating her Bibles.

We might today call this a period of trauma, at home and within, as somewhat evidenced from the letters to her tutor, Hugh Boyd.<sup>13</sup> Especially important to us in understanding the tense relationship is a letter from this period from Nov. 3, 1832, where she notes:

“You are wrong in imagining me to be offended with you. If I have been pained by you, it has been partly my own fault; I do not blame you for paining me. Your actions have always, within my observation, been gentle and amiable; and notwithstanding what you suspect me of insinuating against your disposition, no one could persuade me that any actions of yours could be otherwise. In writing a short letter to you, I did not refer in my thoughts to the short ...” (cont. on p. 408-10) “& you must think it too that you are changed towards me.”<sup>14</sup>

The letter ends with a brief comment about the Psalms on p. 410:

“...this winter, I think I may be called rather industrious. I am thinking of attempting a poetical version of the Psalms in the Spring. Every version of them is essentially unpoetical, & has I believe been made, not from the original Hebrew but from a translation: which circumstance is in itself likely enough to produce weakness and frigidity. I shall be anxious to hear M. Joseph Clarke’s final judgment — Did he estimate your Select Passages?”

EBB annotates her Hebrew text of Psalms prolifically, with at least thirty-nine specific notations in the margins of that text. She also comments in a theological nature on the Psalms in the prefiguring of righteousness and Christ in Psalm 96:11, where she writes, “The just one is, I think, in many passages of the Psalms of which I take this to be one, an appellation which [exclusively] belongs to Christ in his human character.”<sup>15</sup> Her interpretations of the Psalms indicate a deep desire to explore the fuller meanings of the texts. Another example, in Psalm 78:60: EBB underlines the Hebrew word *אִישׁ* (“man” or “person”) then writes: “[...] not among men, as in the EV. The word is singular and no allusion intended to the man? I see that the seventy [...], have *εν ανθρωποις*.”<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that a decade later, in her poems of 1844, EBB incorporates an interesting set of biblical allusions in her work *Lady Geraldine’s Courtship*, specifically playing off of this textual examination of “Adam” and “Man” and “Earth/Clay,”<sup>17</sup> utilizing her linguistic and biblical knowledge.

At some points, the poet’s own frustration with the text comes through, showing us another dimension of her personality. For instance, as can be seen in her notes on Lev. 19:15, she writes: “I don’t understand this. It seems to

<sup>13</sup> See “Twenty Unpublished Letters of EB to Hugh Stuart Boyd” ed. Bennett Weaver, PMLA, Vol. 65, No. 4, (June 1950), 397-418. Also note Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 47. See also in Weaver, letter XII on p. 407.

<sup>14</sup> See letter on p. 407, Letter XII.

<sup>15</sup> EBB marginalia, Psalm 98:11.

<sup>16</sup> EBB marginalia, Psalm 78:60. In this case “EV” is English version and “the seventy” refers to the Septuagint (LXX).

<sup>17</sup> See Stanza LXXXV: “Learn more reverence, madam, not for/ rank or wealth—that needs no/ learning:/ That comes quickly, quick as sin does, ay,/ and culminates to sin;/ But for Adam’s seed, MAN! Trust me,/ ‘t is a clay above your scorning,/ With God’s image stamped upon it, and/ God’s kindling breath within.”

signify ‘thou shalt not [look?] at the face of the poor’— i.e., [reward him with an encouraging favors?] That this should be prohibited seems to be discountenanced by the whole context. Could it be instead of תשא ... השבא ?”<sup>18</sup>

Scholars such as Linda M. Lewis are right to say that EBB’s “primary theological education came from the Bible,”<sup>19</sup> but how much this is so cannot be fully known, until deeper textual studies of her Bibles are undertaken. Interestingly, the use of “face” or “face to face” as noted in Lewis’s *Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Spiritual Progress*, for example, seems to indicate a deep current of spiritual development expressed in later works from *The Seraphim* (1838) onward. Regarding “face,” we may trace EBB’s use of this poetic meme at least to her questions around this verse in Leviticus, which seemed to give her pause. Her reading of Leviticus 19:15 and the unclear use of “Pnei” (פני) in the text — a term which would be used to discuss how she “faced” righteousness, and perhaps ultimately the divine, in later works — is of great importance for examining her linguistic development as a poet; but also, for scholars such as Lewis, it may offer new light into her spiritual questions and development. This same term can be noted in EBB’s Septuagint (LXX) in Jeremiah 1:13, where she comments on the use of the term “facing,” though in the latter case “towards an almond tree.”

### Notations in the Text

EBB made several notations in the Biblical texts, which were often distinguished by various symbols: some looked like “+” while others were more like a capital “I” with dumbbells, and even diamonds with crosses through them. These notations are primarily made to indicate which lexical term went with which note on the side, bottom, or top of the page, as some pages in Genesis and Isaiah, for example, had multiple commentaries by the poet.

### Exegetical Sources

Perhaps some of the most intriguing textual clues left by EBB are notes left in two places: on several pages of the Greek Bible and on a separate unattached page within the Greek Bible case, both of which list a variety of manuscript texts of the LXX, NT, and Hebrew Bible. What is important about some of these notes is that they begin to lead us to the substrata of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century academic source material that afforded her, in part, this tremendous learning in biblical studies and hermeneutics.

Throughout the text of the Hebrew Bible, EBB makes notations referring to scholars and individuals, who have made their own assessments of the biblical texts. Three of the most prominent names found in EBB’s notes are “Wilson, Horsley, and Parkhurst.” “Dr. Wilson” has been identified as Thomas Wilson, D.D., Lord Bishop of Sodor and Man, and whose notes appear in a Bible published in 1785 and edited by Rev. Clement Cruttwell (though Bishop Wilson’s earlier material was found in the *Abstract of the Historical Part of the Old Testament*, 1735). “Horsley” is Samuel Horsley (1733-1806), onetime Bishop of Rochester, who was a highly learned churchman, and author of numerous works, including classical philosophy and literature (such as his work on Virgil from 1805), and his various biblical works, which were highly relevant to EBB’s studies. These included a translation of the Psalms with notes (1815), a book of biblical criticism (1820), and a translation of Hosea (1801). It should also be noted that Horsley wrote a text in 1796 titled *On the Prosodies of the Greek and Latin Languages*, which would surely be of interest to EBB. Whether she read all of Horsley’s writing is unclear, but her citation of his scholarship consistently suggests her familiarity with his work.<sup>20</sup> “Parkhurst” has been identified as John Parkhurst (1728-1797), an English lexicographer, who published various important works on reading the Hebrew and Greek Bibles. Most germane to our discussion, though, are Parkhurst’s *A Greek and English Lexicon of the New Testament* (published and variously edited between 1769 and 1798), and (even more significant) his *A Hebrew and English lexicon without points. (In which the Hebrew and Chaldee words of the Old Testament are explained in their leading and derived senses ... To this work are prefixed an Hebrew and a Chaldee grammar without points)* published in 1813.<sup>21</sup> This is the very book that EBB would have needed to assist her in learning to

<sup>18</sup> EBB marginalia, Lev. 19:15. It is unclear why this word “Sheba” is offered.

<sup>19</sup> Linda M. Lewis, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Spiritual Progress* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 10.

<sup>20</sup> Other names are used throughout the biblical text by EBB, of which not all have been conclusively identified, including “Cabbott” (see notes on Jeremiah 50).

<sup>21</sup> London, printed by T. Davison for F.C. and J. Rivington [etc.] 1813. (7th ed.).



read an unpointed Biblical Hebrew text. Her reference to Parkhurst throughout the margins of this Bible, then, is important for us, because it gives a clearer indication of her academic and pedagogical sources, as well as providing us with a sense of whom she trusted as sound, scholarly writers, thinkers, and commentators on the Biblical texts. As we shall see, EBB engages these authors and their commentaries, especially Parkhurst, at various points agreeing and disagreeing with their contributions and opinions (see for example, her disagreement with Parkhurst's reading of Exodus 24:16, found in her marginalia).

## EBB's Notes and Exegesis of the Hebrew Text

Among the books of the Pentateuch, Genesis has one of the greatest number of notations — thirty-nine instances of distinct notation referring to a term or phrase.<sup>22</sup>

The very beginning of the two-volume biblical text finds EBB's hand, offering a line from Joshua 1:9 in Hebrew "תלך שר עמך יהוה אלהיך בכל אשר" (trans. "for the Lord your God goes with you wherever you go") across from which she writes in Latin "*Elizabeth B Barrett carissimus pater dono dedit*," an indication of the book being a gift from her "dearest father." Her notations begin in the Book of Genesis, starting in Chapter 2, where she notes in both ink and pencil, though the pencil markings are almost completely illegible. In Gen. 2:2, she begins with a comment on the word for "rest" (וישבת) and writes "*not to rest as from fatigue, but simply as from work*." She also notes her understanding of the etymology for the name of God יהוה in Gen. 2:4. In Gen. 2:7 she underlines the word for "soul," (nefesh: נפש) and marks in pencil "*Esaias 34.10 also Job 32... the inspiration of the [...]*."<sup>23</sup>

EBB's marginal inscriptions on Genesis in the Hebrew volumes constitute a listing of both simple symbolic notations or signs, Hebrew words and phrases (and sometimes comparatives in Greek, as in Gen. 22:14 — see below), and her own notes or self-addressed questions in English, numbering about thirty-nine distinct occurrences. When comparing her notes in the Greek LXX, the textual notes do not always match up, except in cases where a specific word is problematic for translation or in some cases the Greek and Hebrew text are inconsistent with each other. This is the case in Gen. 21:9, where EBB has underlined the LXX text reading "Ἰσαακ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτῆς"<sup>24</sup> and then in notes on the side she writes "*not in the Hebrew*."

Among her thirty-nine notations in Genesis include Gen. 2:18 "(כנגדו) — as before him. inclusion of birds and beasts, often, but it cannot be so here." Gen. 3:13; Gen. 4; Gen. 6; Gen. 6:9 "(צדיק) — a justified person. one who obtains the effect of being justified." Gen. 9; Gen. 10; Gen. 22:14 (יהוה יראה) — "the Septuagint translates these expressions differently — the first κυριος ειδεν — the second κυριος ωφθη." And Gen. 30:8 "God hath entwined me and I am entwined, and I am rendered able.' The Septuagint is nearer the sense than the English version is." These often brief comments reflect her interest in various terminologies, specifically ones that she finds unclear or wanting more explanation in English.

The Pentateuchal books have a fair number of notations, but not as extensively as those in Genesis. *Exodus* has twenty-four instances of distinct notation, and perhaps its most significant marginalia can be seen in her comments on Parkhurst, in at least two examples. For the most part she references him, but in one instance is critical of his judgment of the text. She writes in Exodus 24:16 "(וישכן) — "see Parkhurst's observation on this word as used in 3-24 Genesis. Surely he has overlooked the passage where (שכן) can hardly be applied to a material tabernacle;" and from Exodus 28:30, which reads in EBB's handwriting "The Urim and Thammim, [eight...perfections? the precious stones?] Parkhurst conceives; and there seems to be no good reason of seeking a deeper mystery." Leviticus has twenty-two

<sup>22</sup> In each chapter, I have counted what appear to be distinct reflections or notes made by EBB regarding words, meaning, textual and exegetical in common and so forth. Usually, each comment is unrelated, though in some cases she will refer back to other biblical passages or comments she made earlier. In several cases, she refers to specific scholars, whom she has been reading and consulting (and can be reviewed in exegetical sources in prior section).

<sup>23</sup> See Gen. 2:7 (Leningrad Codex) and use of the word for "soul."

<sup>24</sup> Gen. 21:9 (LXX): Ἰδουσα δε σαρρα τον υιον αγαρ της αιγυπτιας ος εγενετο τω αβρααμ παιζοντα μετα Ἰσαακ του υιου αὐτῆς.

instances of distinct notation, and offers an interesting discussion of terms, specifically as we highlighted earlier in Leviticus 19:15, around EBB's problem with understanding the text in relation to "facing the poor." She also makes comments about the LXX text in Lev. 1:17.

*Numbers* has thirty-four instances of distinct notations, though many are insignificant and give little insight into EBB's study of the text. *Deuteronomy* has seventeen instances, with the penultimate page highly notated. EBB writes a substantive comment, which turns out to be a quotation of one of Horsley's homiletic interpretations.<sup>25</sup> *Joshua*, which only has eight instances of notation, has a couple interesting commentaries, including EBB's reference to Dante's *Inferno*. She writes about Joshua 10:12 — (זרז) "The word is applied to silence of voice, as well as to quietness of situation. Dante says 'Dove 'l sol *tace*<sup>26</sup> —,' and Samson [...], or rather Milton, under his name, the sun to me is dark, and silent. Compare Hezekiah; writing Isaiah 38..."<sup>27</sup> And later in Joshua 24:32, she comments on the term (קשיטה) — "Perhaps a coin stamped with the figure of a lamb. Our places of rest are all bought with it."

*Judges* has seventeen instances, with two interesting comments, including Judges 6:5, which she notes (ארבה) "Why should our translation say grasshoppers. Locusts is the word: and the [figure?] is incomplete [with it?]."<sup>28</sup> The other is the longest notation in this book, in Judges 13:18, which reads (פלא) "Wonderful. See Isaiah 9.6. The English version translates it secret, and yet in the very next verse where the same root occurs, it says 'the angel said wondrously.' The Septuagint is correct in this verse tho' not in the very next verse — και αυτο εστι θαυμαστικ. This is singular. Compare Isaiah 9.5."<sup>29</sup> *I Samuel* has ten instances of notation, while *II Samuel* has merely two instances, with *II Samuel* 5 having a lengthy note, based on Parkhurst. *I Kings* contains six instances of notation, with this comment in *I Kings* 19:4 — (רתם) "A tree of Spanish broom, affording of course little shade. But God can work comfort for his servants out of little means. He can draw light from darkness, or shadow from the broom."<sup>30</sup>

Volume II begins with various inscriptions inside the cover in EBB's handwriting: "Written in the Chaldaic Dialect: *Jeremiah C.X.VII. Daniel from v.4 of the 2nd to the end of the 4th Chapter. Ezra c.4 from v.8, to c.6v.19: and c.7 from v.12. to v.4.*" EBB also has an inscription on the first title page, written about the words in Latin and Hebrew *Prophetae*: "Elis/pae B Barrett, dono dedit pater dilectus." On the bottom of the same page reads a line in Hebrew, stating that it is from "Psalm 13 v. 6" ... בישועתך יגל לבי בטחתי יגל לבי בישועתך — though it is actually Psalm 13:5 (trans. "Though I have trusted in your loving kindness, my heart shall rejoice in your salvation").

Of the major prophets, *Isaiah* has the most notations by EBB, with eighty-eight instances of distinct notation. She begins in the first chapter, and discusses such things as with Isaiah 1:10 סדום — "Not the actual Sodom + Gamorrah, but the people which [reveled?] them in sin." *Isaiah* may be an integral chapter for EBB, as in Chapter 2, she offers some view into her thinking around the terms of humanity and "man," with distinctions between ("Ish": אִישׁ) and ("Adam": אָדָם). She writes about Isaiah 2:9 אָדָם (Adam) in the following marginal note:

"The man of clay (the animal man), bows down, the man of [subsistence], (the intellectual man) humbleth himself — + [he?] will not pardon them." Both the body + soul are polluted by sin and a just God cannot forgive sin. By the work of Jesus He forgives sinners: but if he could have [forgiven] sin, that work would

<sup>25</sup> EBB writes on penultimate page of *Deuteronomy*: "Horsely's version: Jehovah came from Sinai; his uprising was from [...]; He displayed his glory from the mount Paran; And from the midst of the myriads came forth the Holy One, — On his right hand streams of fire. O loving Father of the peoples! All the saints are in thy hand, they are seated at thy feet, and have received of thy doctrine. So as, he (the Holy One) prescribed a law. Jacob is the inheritance of the Preacher. He (the preacher) shall be king in Jeshurun..." (And such goes on — indeed, this is from Horsley's *Sermons*, p. 170 from Vol. I of his *Sermons* from 1811, NY: T. & J. Swords.)

<sup>26</sup> Dante, *Inferno* I: 60 (lit. "where the sun is silent").

<sup>27</sup> This is an interesting comment and link made by EBB, between Dante's line and Samson, who had been traditionally linked to the word "shemesh" for sun, which as is known from *Judges*, was put out by the symbol of night "Delilah," through the act of cutting his hair. The character of Samson Agonistes in Milton's drama is referred to here.

<sup>28</sup> The King James Version appears to have "grasshoppers" instead of "locusts."

<sup>29</sup> This corresponds to her note in the Greek LXX.

<sup>30</sup> *II Kings* has 0 instances, but the last page which is blank has a list of biblical names in EBB's hand.

have been [unne...], There seems to me to be much more in this verse: in the distinction between **אדם** and **איש** than we find in the E.V.”

She adds in Isaiah 2:10 “And what is the remedy for this non-forgiveness of the **אדם** and **איש** ? Go into the rock. I cannot doubt about the meaning of the passage: and it seems to me very beautiful. See C.5.15.” Isaiah 3:3: ונבוך לחש “Skilled in whispered or mysterious speech.”

In Isaiah 11:6, her Christology begins to develop, where she writes “I am inclined to refer this word נער to the divine son, as in the preceding chapter. [...]”<sup>31</sup> He causes Paul as well as John to bend beneath his ...” Isaiah 13:11: “The [mis...] of earth and water. A reference to the preceding verse and ...[1/2] the stars sun moon signify the great of the earth a continuation of the metaphor.” And in Isaiah 42:15, she writes “The application of this word proves that **איים** cannot signify islands. Yet even here the SV<sup>32</sup> says islands — .” Even toward the end of the Book of Isaiah, she goes more into the details of Christology in Isaiah 50:11, where she notes “Christ is the one true ‘light’, [the] world.’ When man would strike a light, it is a light which rather scorches than shines. He is guided with flames to his own torture.”

*Jeremiah* has nineteen instances of distinct notation, and her comments are somewhat fragmentary.<sup>33</sup> As for *Ezekiel*, there are only nine instances of distinct notation. It may be interesting to note that there are few notations in the book of Ezekiel, which some might consider a fairly complex book of the Bible. EBB’s notes on this book are minimal and perhaps most interesting in Ezekiel 31:3: (והרש מצל) “‘May it [not] be better understood,’ says Parkhurst, ‘silent with [shade]?’” For most of the minor prophets, EBB only makes minor comments, many of which are simple annotations or underlined words, including the following list<sup>34</sup> found in the footnotes.

It is not until the *Psalms*, where there are at least another thirty-nine instances of distinct notation, that her commentaries become more frequent again. *The Book of Psalms* presents an intriguing problem and issue for scholars on the grounds that already in November 1832 EBB had made note to Hugh Boyd that she intended to make a translation of the Psalms, because existing translations lacked any “poetic” version based on the Hebrew original. Yet EBB’s notes on Psalms are not highly detailed, and there is no published translation that we know of by EBB. What can be said is that the scholarship of Dr. Wilson is referred to often in these marginal notes (cf. Psalm 25 and its notations about Dr. Wilson).<sup>35</sup>

Proverbs has only three instances of distinct notation,<sup>36</sup> and comments on Proverbs 26:8 are also found in her LXX. *The Book of Job* is another highly notated biblical book with forty-six instances of distinct notation, considering its comparative length to other longer books. Much can be said and taken from this, especially if we consider EBB’s specific notes — and the nature of Job and his suffering. One of the most intriguing comments comes from Job 33:23, where EBB writes “... The passage evidently relates to the one mediator between God and man — the [chiefest?] among

<sup>31</sup> Illegible script of EBB.

<sup>32</sup> Standard Version, which at this time usually referred to the KJV or its revisions.

<sup>33</sup> These include Jeremiah 1:11: “שקד — The almond tree flowers as early as January. שקד — to hasten or watch. [...]” Jeremiah 1:13: [Referring to וּמִפְנֵי וּפְנֵי] “[...blo... apon.?] [heated?] by having the fire blown upon it. P\_\_\_” X “Do it not ‘from the face of the north.. In stead of ‘towards the face’ as in the EV. The wind which blew the fire against the po[t], proceeded from the north. See the next verse. The Sept. says απο προσωπε.”

<sup>34</sup> Spellings of Biblical Books are based on the EBB text, the 1750 *Biblia Hebraica Sine Punctis Acc. Nat. Forster, Oxon.*; *Hosea* (2 instances of distinct notation); *Joel* (2 instances of distinct notation); *Amos* (4 instances of distinct notation); *Obadia* (0 instances of distinct notation); *Jona* (3 instances of distinct notation); *Micha* (1 instance of distinct notation); *Nahum* (2 instances of distinct notation); *Habakuk* (0 instances of distinct notation); *Zephania* (2 instances of distinct notation); *Haggai* (1 instance of distinct notation); *Zacharia* (4 instances of distinct notation); EBB writes a note in Chapter 5 (*Zacharia* 5:3), but then crosses it out.; and *Malachia* (1 instance of distinct notation).

<sup>35</sup> Psalm 78:60 -- [EBB underlines אדם] ... then writes: “[...] not among men, as in the EV. The word is singular and no allusion intended to the man? I see that the seventy [...], have εν ανθρωποις.” Though, also in Psalms we find perhaps one of EBB’s most theological statements in Psalm 98:11: “The just one is, I think, in many passages of the Psalms of which I take this to be one, an appellation which [exclusively] belongs to Christ in his human character.”

<sup>36</sup> NB: Ch. 9 & Ch. 15 pages have a slight rip in the center of page, which was reworked.



ten thousand! And it was not [...] or balanced to me. God did not balance it. — P.”<sup>37</sup> The remaining biblical books in these volumes contain only a few notes.<sup>38</sup>

### Her Notes on the Septuagint and the New Testament<sup>39</sup>

EBB’s notes and marginalia are so numerous, small, and detailed that they often require great concentration, time, and patience to decipher; primarily, the task of looking at her marginal notes in the Greek text — a combined volume of the LXX and the Greek NT — proves to be a formidable task. Many of her own notes come in a listing in the blank pages between the LXX and the Greek NT, and list several manuscripts and biblical codices. It was not initially clear from where she gathered this information, but after some investigation, we can be fairly certain that EBB was consulting *The Holy Bible: Containing the New and Old Testaments* (vol. 12), by Adam Clarke, LL.D. (1814), pp. xi-xiii.<sup>40</sup> This is clear from the multiple similarities in the text of Clarke, which appear almost verbatim in the EBB text, in her own handwriting.

Similar to her scholarly influences in the study of Hebrew and the Hebrew Bible, EBB found some interesting New Testament scholarship in the works of Adam Clarke (1762–1832), Methodist theologian and biblical scholar; Herbert Marsh (1757–1839), Bishop in the Church of England, biblical scholar and translator of Michaelis’s *Introduction of the NT*; Johann David Michaelis (1717–1791), biblical scholar; and Johann Jakob Wetstein (1693–1754), a Swiss theologian and New Testament critic. It cannot be determined with certainty that these individuals’ works were in the Barrett library, but certainly their works were consulted at one point by EBB to draw many of her theories and conclusions about the text, many of which guided her to her positions. As noted before, the focus of this article is on the Hebrew Bible and Septuagint, but mention of the New Testament is necessary as it is in the same volume as the Greek LXX.

### Septuagint Notations

As commented on earlier, the Hebrew Bible and Greek LXX texts of EBB were not equally notated by the poet. In the Greek LXX, Genesis has ~fifty-four distinct textual notations, which is more than the ~thirty-nine notations found in EBB’s Hebrew text. There is cross over in only a few spots, including Genesis 3:13 (אשׁ in Hebrew), which is noted in both her Hebrew Bible and LXX. The footnote list is a select number of notations from the LXX Genesis — some are merely words that EBB underlined, while others are her distinct comments.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> “P.” indicates “John Parkhurst.”

<sup>38</sup> *Canticum Canticorum* (*Song of Songs*) (6 instances of distinct notation); *Ruth* (0 instances) In *Ruth*, EBB has no comments; *Threni* (*Lamentations*) (4 instances of distinct notation); *Ecclesiastes* (3 instances of distinct notation); *Esther* (0 instances of distinct notation); again, like *Ruth*, EBB has no comments on the biblical books based on women characters. Should this be something of note? *Daniel* (2 instances of distinct notation); *Ezra* (3 instances of distinct notation); *Nehemia* (0 instances of distinct notation); *I Chronicorum* (few instances of distinct notation).

<sup>39</sup> The actual biblical text use by EBB is the “Vetus Testamentum secundum Septuaginta Seniorum interpretationem juxta exemplar vaticanum summa cura denuo recusum; adjiciuntur editionis Brabianae variae lectiones. Londini: Sumptibus Samuelis Bagster, 15, Paternoster Row, MDCCCXXXVIII.”

<sup>40</sup> See Google Books: [http://books.google.com/books?id=inMuAAAAYAAJ&pg=RA1-PR12&lpg=RA1-PR12&dq=welstein+bible&source=bl&ots=X7LBUZh7Jg&sig=TU\\_6lT5YUZNNdVpajXDwqxPE3Tc&hl=en&sa=X&ei=8EisUKmPAAtG0QGO5ICQDQ&ved=0CEMQ6AEwAw#v=onepage&q=welstein%20bible&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=inMuAAAAYAAJ&pg=RA1-PR12&lpg=RA1-PR12&dq=welstein+bible&source=bl&ots=X7LBUZh7Jg&sig=TU_6lT5YUZNNdVpajXDwqxPE3Tc&hl=en&sa=X&ei=8EisUKmPAAtG0QGO5ICQDQ&ved=0CEMQ6AEwAw#v=onepage&q=welstein%20bible&f=false) (Accessed Nov. 20, 2012).

<sup>41</sup> Gen. 3:29 (εξ ημων); Gen. 9:27 (Πλατυναί) – יפה [...]; Gen. 14:18 (μεγαλισεδεκ βασιλεὺς Σαλιμ) – “The king of righteousness, the king of peace.” Gen. 17:1 (ὁ θεός σου) “the bountiful God — (דד) [...];” Gen. 19:24 (καὶ κύριος and παρὰ κυρίου) — “... is as a proof of the living pre-existence,” Gen. 20:16 (καὶ πάντα ἀλήθευσον) — “[sin?] and not the English ‘...he was reproved’ is consistent with the Hebrew נכח”; Gen. 21:3 - ισαακ; Gen. 21:9 - (ισαακ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτῆς) — EBB: “not in the Hebrew;” Gen. 21:10-11 -- EBB “Gal 4.30”; Gen. 22:14: (κύριος εἶδεν and κύριος ὥφθη) – EBB: “the same Hebrew word, ירהוה ירהוה”; Gen. 33:19 — ἀμνῶν +טשק a coin on which the figure of a lamb or sheep was imprinted, compare Acts 7.16; See her notes on Joshua 24:32, discussed earlier.

Gen. 42:23 — (ἐρμηνευτή) EBB: “Parkhurst is of opinion that the Hebrew word מְלִיץ does not signify interpreter but intercessor, mediator, the officer appointed as advocate.” *Exodus* has -twenty-one distinct textual notations in the Greek LXX. The biblical books from *Leviticus* to *Esther* in the Greek LXX have few notations and the number of distinct notes is listed in the footnotes.<sup>42</sup> *Job* has nine notes, including Job 1:5, 1:11 (יְבָרַךְ עַל־פְּנֵיךְ) “he had blessed the (surely?)...” / “to thy face. i.e., hypocritically?”<sup>43</sup> *Psalms* has twenty-four notes — significant notes include those listed here: Psalm 8:5 (ἀγγελος) EBB underlines this word and in the margin writes (אלוהים).<sup>44</sup> See also Psalm 138 below; Psalm 96:11 (τω δικαιω) EBB: “Horsley refers this appellation exclusively to Christ in his human character. He considers this 96th as the first of five psalms relating to the introduction of the first [r...er?] into the word.” Psalm 138:1 (αγγελων) — EBB underlines this word and then writes next to it in Hebrew (רוהים); Psalm 146:4 (O αριθμων) — EBB: “[...] can be numbers, but the glories of his understanding are numberless. The Hebrew [xxx] is yet more em[...] ... .” *Proverbs* contains only three notes, including Proverbs 26:8 (εν σφενδονη) EBB: “Scha[...]ens says a [...] of stones thrown on the [face?] of one who has been stoned to death.”<sup>45</sup> *Ecclesiastes* has 1 note, while *Isaiah* has 16 notes. *Jeremiah* has two notes, including this interesting comment about “face,” in Jeremiah 1:13 (απο προσωπου) EBB: “קדש to watch, hasten the almond tree flowers early. / As in the Hebrew מפני. The EV says contradict[ing] to both [...] a cont[...] towards the face.”

The remaining texts of the LXX contain few notes, with these notations specifically tallied in the footnotes below.<sup>46</sup>

## Browning's Exegetical Interests Within the Context of Her Intellectual and Spiritual Trajectory

Important biographical and psychological studies of EBB and her work shed a great deal of light on this study. A good example is Alexandra Wörn's work, which describes in some detail the death of EBB's mother in 1828, and the

<sup>42</sup> (Leviticus...4 distinct notes); (Numbers...1 distinct note); (Deuteronomy...12 distinct notations); (Joshua...3 distinct notations); (Judges...4 distinct notations); (Ruth...0 notations); (I Samuel...0 note) βασιλειων Α; (II Samuel...0 note) βασιλειων Β; (I Kings...2 notes) βασιλειων Γ; (II Kings... 0 notes) βασιλειων Δ; (I Chronicles...0 notes); (II Chronicles...0 notes); (Esdras...0 notes); (Nehemiah...0 notes) (Esther...0 notes);

<sup>43</sup> Also: Job 9:9 (πλειάδα και ἔσπερον και ἄρκτοῦρον) EBB: “blight, cold, genial warmth...”

<sup>44</sup> Both this verse in Psalm 8 and that in Psalm 138 are curiously translated. Here the KJV has “angels,” which indicates a translation from the LXX, while other more modern translations use the Hebrew “God.” In Psalm 138 the Hebrew and Greek terms are usually translated as “gods” (pl.), including in the KJV. EBB's notes indicate her recognition of this, and it may be interesting to look at her later poetic use of the term in English (though, ἀγγελ- has a distinct meaning of “message/messenger”). See, for example, EBB's poems *A Man's Requirement* (VIII): “Love me, kneeling at thy prayers,/ With the angels round thee.”; *A Thought for a Lonely Deathbed*: “No earthly friend being near me, interpose/ No deathly angel 'twixt my face and thine,/ But stoop Thyself to gather my life's rose,/ And smile away my mortal to Divine!” (This is an interesting usage of biblical elements “angel” and “face/facing,” as we noted earlier); and several instances in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, including III, VII, & XXII; also in *Lord Walter's Wife* (VIII-IX): [my emphasis]

VIII: ‘But you,’ he replied, ‘have a daughter, a young child, who was laid  
In your lap to be pure; so I leave you: *the angels* would make me afraid.”

IX: ‘Oh that,’ she said, ‘is no reason. *The angels* keep out of the way;

And Dora, the child, observes nothing, although you should please me and stay.’

EBB is informed in some capacity by the meaning of “angel,” though it's not clear how the biblical text influenced these judgments and perceptions. And if we look to her poetry, we could ask many questions, including: what role does this celestial idea have in her work, as for instance in this poetic exchange, where angels strike fear? Is there a relevant connection between this and her reading of the biblical texts? (See sources listed at the conclusion for further examples.)

<sup>45</sup> Cross referenced in EBB's Hebrew Bible text.

<sup>46</sup> (Epistle of Jeremiah...0 notes); (Ezekiel...2 notes); (Daniel...0 notes); (Hosea...4 notes); (Joel...0 notes); (Amos...0 notes); (Obadiah...0 notes); (Jonah...0 notes); (Micah...0 notes); (Nahum...2 notes); (Habakkuk...0 notes); (Zephaniah...0 note); (Haggai...0 note); (Zechariah...1 note); (Malachi...0 notes), though the blank page after has a whole page of notes, many of them scribbled out.

subsequent spiritual formation of Elizabeth, just barely a couple years past 20.<sup>47</sup> This period is clearly interesting and crucial to understanding the development of EBB, who through some directed tutorials in classical literature is largely a self-taught exegete. Her spiritual development comes not only in her daily interactions and discussions with others, but in her own reading of the texts in their original languages. The Greek (LXX) Bible that EBB uses was published the year of her mother's death, so it is likely that it was purchased during a period of personal travail. The Hebrew Bible, though eighty-two years old at the time of its annotation by EBB, is read and notated in the year following the sale of the family home at Hope End.<sup>48</sup>

Wörn's notes in the last paragraph of her piece "Poetry is Where God Is: The Importance of Christian Faith and Theology in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Life and Work"<sup>49</sup> writes about EBB's 1831-32 diary, in which she claims to have read "7 chapters a day" of the Bible. However, it also discusses her sense toward God and what she was reading was very much the "work of God," at least according to a letter she wrote to a friend (and cited on the bottom of p. 237 of Wörn's article). This is very interesting, because most biographies, even modern ones, seem to omit her reading of "God's Word" (i.e., the Bible), and usually incorporate a half dozen other works and writers from antiquity and beyond. But if this is accurate, and she is noting this in 1831, she is already delving deeply into the biblical text. I would assert that this disruption in moving to Sidmouth, as well as her complex and often tense relationship with Mr. Hugh Boyd, may well have pushed EBB into a deeper study of the Bible in its original tongues. What is most important, though, in this present examination, is the recognition that much of what EBB writes later on, whether in her works from 1836-38, 1844, or *Aurora Leigh* (EBB's epic poem) from 1856, comes back to the foundational studies she did in these Hebrew and Greek Bibles in 1832-3. As Wörn suggests, "Through *Aurora* [Leigh], EBB enfleshes the Christian resurrection to new life, as the ending, or rather the beginning of her poetic narrative."<sup>50</sup> This narrative, as with many others suggested by scholars, may well have taken its impetus from the very biblical studies (especially in Leviticus and Psalms) that we have surveyed in this paper.

## Conclusion

We are left to make what we can of EBB's extensive biblical marginalia. Certainly the extensiveness of her exegetical notes warrants a much more extensive study than the present essay can afford. That said, some things have become very clear through this overview: EBB was a skilled linguist and scholar, who was competent and able to dig into the richness of both the Hebrew and Greek languages. She knew these languages well, perhaps Greek better, as she'd studied it already for nearly a dozen years, by the time she'd made her notes in these Bibles. She relied to some degree on the assessments of individuals like Horsley, Parkhurst, and others but was sufficiently confident to be able to draw independent conclusions from her own investigations of the text. It is also evident that at this point in her life she approached the Bible as a devoted Christian, whose explorations of the biblical text were energized by her own faith (her notes on Psalm 96 and the prefiguring of Christ serving as only one example). And there are indications that her exegetical pursuits during this period bore fruit later on in her more mature works, such as *Wine of Cyprus*, XXI — on Christ, and especially in *Aurora Leigh*.

EBB's studies and knowledge of the Bible and of ancient languages gave her a greater facility to express the poeticism of language in general — Hebrew, Greek, and English. And her work is a testimony of the ability to explore the deeper, richer meaning of interaction between the human being and the divine — especially where one recognizes the importance of "facing" God and what that means on every level of poetry and human existence.

<sup>47</sup> See Alexandra Wörn, "Poetry is Where God Is: The Importance of Christian Faith and Theology in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Life and Work," in *Victorian Religious Discourse: New Directions in Criticism*, ed. Jude V. Nixon (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 236.

<sup>48</sup> Perhaps the best description of her Hebrew study and her work at this time is by Dorothy Mermin, in her excellent volume *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry*. See Dorothy Mermin.

<sup>49</sup> See Alexandra Wörn, "Poetry is Where God Is..." 237.

<sup>50</sup> See Alexandra Wörn, "Aurora, the Morning Star: Shedding a New Light on 19th Century Christology — EBB's poetic novel *Aurora Leigh* as a model for a poetic Christology." *European Journal of Theology*, 11:2 (2002), 137. See also Glennis Stephenson, 238.

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