History of Cartography Project
No.1: The Navigator's Line

Commentary

I had already chosen this passage from 
Job for our first broadsheet in the History 
of Cartography series with Brian Harley's 
agreement before his tragically premature 
death on 20 December 1991. When 
Paul Laxton, quite independently, chose 
it to read at Brian's memorial service in 
Devon on 16 March 1992, it seemed 
doubly appropriate.

It is an interesting passage, fraught 
with interpretative difficulties. For those 
interested in the history of cartography 
and navigation, the references to the Dog-
star and the Navigator's Line are par-
icularly intriguing. This interpretation 
appears only in the New English Bible, 
although the wording was not changed in the 
Revised English Bible.1 In all other 
translations, the general interpretation of 
verse 13 ("Have you taught it to grasp the 
fringes of the earth and shake the Dog-
star from its place;") and 15 ("when the 
light of the Dog-star is dimmed and the 
stars of the Navigator's Line go out one 
by one?") are, respectively: "so that it 
might take hold of the skirts of the earth, 
and the wicked be shaken out of it," and 
"Light is withheld from the wicked, and 
their uplifted arm is broken." The dif-
cult word is "wicked" which, in the 
original Hebrew, contains a suspended 
letter, indicating that early copyists were 
unsure of its meaning.

The brilliant semiticist and arabist Dr. 
G. R. Driver, one of the editors of the 
New English Bible, translates this word 
"Dog-star" and believes the "high arm" is 
an astral idiom which he translates as the 
"Navigator's Line." He expounds his view 
in a short article where he proposes that 
the Navigator's Line was a series of stars 
"extended like a bent arm across the sky 
from horizon to zenith" which he 
identifies as Sirius (a Canis Majoris) = "the 
Dog-star," or the bright star of evil 
omen that appears in the hot and sultry season 
(hence the "dog days of summer"), 
Procyon (a Canis Minoris), Castor and 
Pollux (a and b Geminorum).2 Driver's 
interpretation is not generally accepted 
among American biblical scholars, who 
prefer a more moralistic and less 
technological interpretation. But the 
ocurrence of similar astronomical 
imagery in this passage makes Driver's 
elegant view worthy of further study by 
those interested in early Arabic and 
Hebrew astronomy and navigation.

1. The Book of Job 38: 4-15. The New English 
Bible. Oxford University Press and Cambridge 

2. G. R. Driver, "Two Astronomical Passages in 
the Old Testament," Journal of Theological 

Acknowledgement. I would like to thank Richard Henshaw and Keith N. Schoville for help in the 
interpretation of this passage.

Printed by David Woodward on Rives Heavyweight with a Vandercook No. 4 at the Juniper Press, 
Madison, Wisconsin. The type is 18 pt. Centaur 352 (Lectern Bible) set by Harold Berliner's 
Typefoundry, Nevada City, California. 193 copies have been numbered and initialed.

Published 1992 by the History of Cartography Project, Department of Geography 
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