

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 particularly 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 difficult 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* (α *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* (α *Canis Minoris*), *Castor* and *Pollux* (α and β *Geminorum*).² Driver's interpretation is not generally accepted among American biblical scholars, who prefer a more moralistic and less technological interpretation. But the occurrence 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 University Press, 1970, pp. 720-21.

2. G. R. Driver, "Two Astronomical Passages in the Old Testament," *Journal of Theological Studies* (Oxford) N.S. 3-4 (1952-53): 208-12.

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