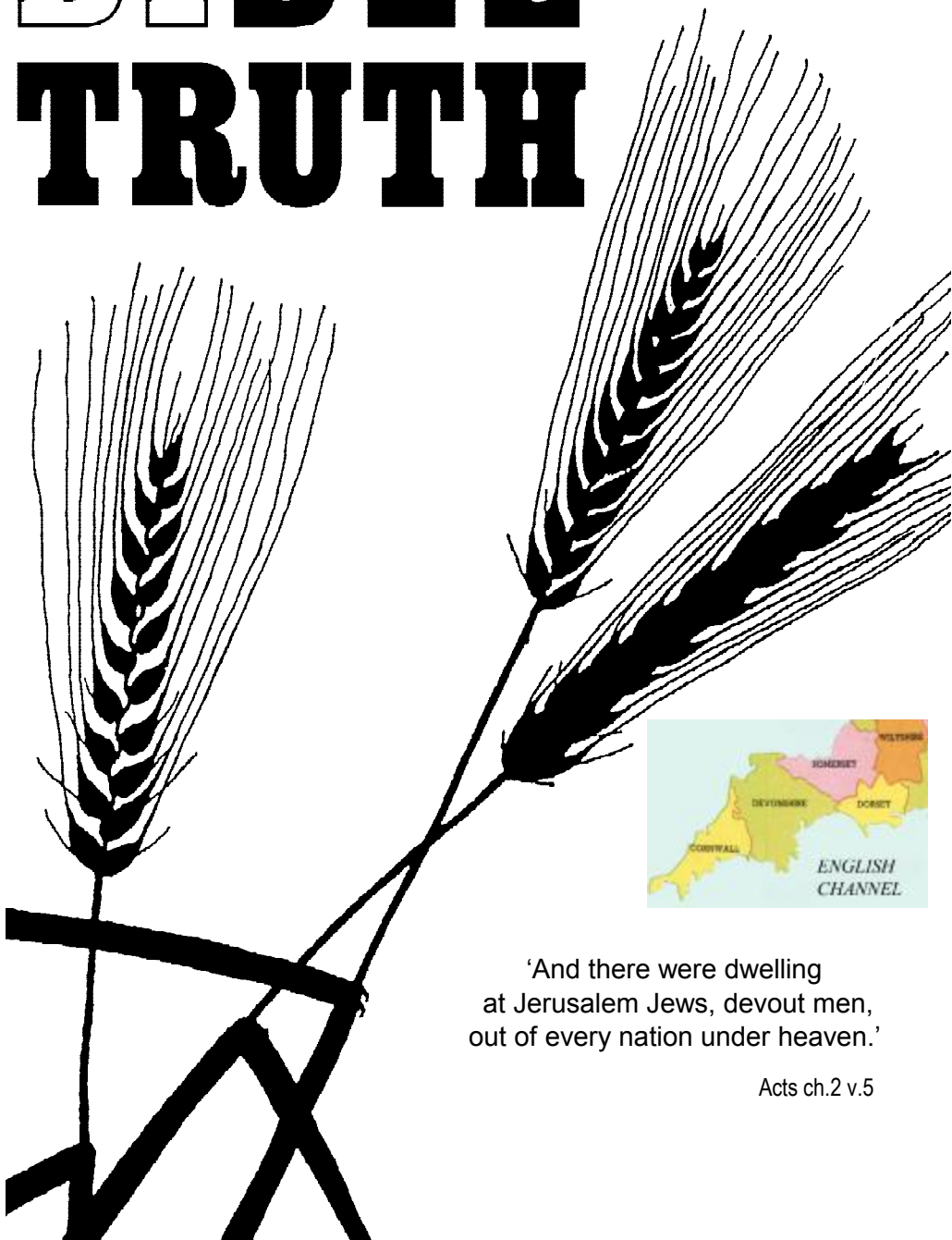


# BIBLE TRUTH

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‘And there were dwelling  
at Jerusalem Jews, devout men,  
out of every nation under heaven.’

Acts ch.2 v.5

# THE WEST SAXON LANGUAGE BASIS OF THE SOMERSET DIALECT

By late The Rev. Dr Norman Court Litt.D., Ph.D., F.R.A.I.  
(Chairman of The Society of Somerset Folk)



In this highly sophisticated age it is customary, even commonplace, for people with only a limited knowledge of history and philosophy to underrate and belittle the achievements of our forefathers, pouring scorn and opprobrium on all that has taken centuries of painstaking labour to create.

In actual fact the very foundations of all that we so proudly call 'modern' are embedded in the solid rock of past achievement and experience. This applies, amongst many other things, to the allied subjects of etymology and philology, and especially as our findings concern the Old English language, from which West Saxon and its derivative, our Somerset dialect, have sprung.

## **The Word 'Dialect' and its Significance**

The word '*dialect*' is in many ways a vague, almost mysterious appellation. Old English, often termed Anglo-Saxon, is, strictly speaking, a dialect derived from dialects, in their turn descended from West Germanic. Old Saxon and Old Frisian are closely related. West Germanic itself comes from an earlier or '*primitive Germanic*' from which, too, is derived Gothic and Old Norse. A dialect becomes

a language when it is established within national boundaries or frontiers, as are the languages of England and the lowlands of Scotland, Holland, Flanders, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Iceland and Germany, all of which are derived from a common source.

If one were to pursue the argument to the nearest one can get to an ultimate conclusion, one would discover that the parent of all these was descended from a remote Indo-European ancestor, the source of Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Celtic and Slavonic. Going back further still we would find that Shemitic (commonly called Semitic) and Indo-European were twin branches of a parent Caucasian tongue, a view held by many eminent philologists, including Professor Max Müller.

Somewhere along the line, too, basic Hebrew became an ingredient in the formation of Old English. The conclusions of the philologist, Simon M. Perlman, in his work, *'English Words of Hebrew Origin'*, (London, 1947) are interesting. He states,

'One-third of the Anglo-Saxon language is identical with Hebrew. To consider such high a proportion as coincidence is absurd and ridiculous. The old rule that similarity of sound is of no importance cannot be applied where the identity amounts to one-third of the language'.

The observations of such an eminent authority as Professor J. Courtenay James, MA., B.D., Ph.D., the author of *The Language of Palestine*, are worth noting in this connection, especially when it comes to the question of 'sound'. In a thesis on *Hebrew and English*, he states,

'From early times in the history of the English Bible scholars have hinted at some sort of likeness between the Hebrew original and the Anglo-Saxon forms of thought and expression. Tyndale, in translating the Bible sensed this likeness, without attempting to illustrate or prove exactly what he meant. Competent scholars have frequently pointed out similarities in sound and sense between English and Hebrew words. This is a very interesting problem and cannot be dismissed by a contemptuous wave of the hand ...'

'In these meditations we indicate that whatever likeness there may exist between Hebrew words and constructions and

'English', that likeness belongs rather to Old English than to the modern language. This will be clear when it is remembered that Anglo-Saxon was a pure language — that is, it contained no foreign elements — whereas modern English has a vocabulary enriched from many sources.'

The Rev. Jacob Tomlin, in his interesting and comprehensive work, *Comparative Vocabulary of Forty Eight Languages*, informs us that approximately a quarter of the words in Saxon bear an affinity to Hebrew. He continues,



'Not only in words does this close affinity exist between our original mother tongue and the Hebrew, but in the arrangement of ideas, and in the simple structure of the sentences, it has also a near agreement'.

Canon Lysons compiled a list of five thousand Hebrew words from our English Lexicon. He informs us that his '*object is to show that the whole foundation of the English Language, as we now use it, is Hebrew or Chaldee*'.

Max Müller, the eminent philologist, traces eight hundred Hebrew roots in the Old English language. Poste, on the other hand (*Gaulish and British Coins*) traces as many as 6,000 Hebrew roots in English. Alex Geddes, LL.D., says,

'Luckily for an English translator of the Bible, he will not be often under any great necessity of departing much from the arrangement of the Hebrew, especially in the poetical parts of Scripture where the two idioms are so congenial as to appear almost like twin brothers'.

William Tyndale, the leading translator of the Hebrew Bible and Greek Testament into English, declared,

'The Greek agree-eth more with the Englyshe than the Latyne; and the properties of the Hebrew tongue agree-eth a thousand times more with the Englyshe than with the Latyne'.

### **Through all the Changing Scenes**

Language is constantly changing, enlarging, casting off old forms. The English (Englisc) of Alfred the Great would be practically unintelligible to an Englishman of the present day unless he were a scholar or student of the language. It would be far more intelligible to a dialect speaker or student of dialect than to an individual who knew only standard modern English.

The whole purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate that our dialect — the Somerset speech — has an honourable background. When an internationally respected scholar, Courtenay-James, can say that *'it is fairly evident that the farther we trace back the English language the clearer becomes the likeness to Hebrew,'* and also that *'the Saxon form of English was more akin to Hebrew,'* we can at least acknowledge the antiquity of our West Country speech. *'In Hebrew and Saxon the personal pronoun was contained in the verb and included in its conjugation'.* He cites numerous examples. Many of these early forms are still with us in our Somerset dialect, especially in its Western form. The expressions, *'he says, says he,'* and *'the rain it fell in buckets,'* are not phrases to be laughed at; but are ancient forms of speech that go back to remote antiquity and are more expressive and understandable than the sophisticated double-talk of this present day and age.

In many ways the language has deteriorated. One has only to read a portion from the Psalms in the Authorised Version of the Holy Scriptures, and compare it with a reading of the same portion in a modern translation to see the difference.

### **The English People**

Betsy Trotwood in *David Copperfield*, by Charles Dickens, was made to utter a profound truth.

'It is vain to recall the past unless it works some influence upon the present.'

Serious students of the subject of dialect are not only scientific historians but sentimentalists as well. And when we reflect on our

English ancestors, the speakers of the dialect, we recall that without their struggles, our life would not be possible; and without their sterling efforts, freedom would have long since fled the earth. We owe a tremendous debt to our forefathers. The British Empire and Commonwealth, and the Anglo-Saxon or English-speaking world which includes the United States of America, are great achievements which we owe primarily to that band of balanced, democratic monarchists who landed on our shores in the early fifth century of our era. They were later reinforced by related Danes, Norsemen and Normans, the latter being descended from the same tribal group which had already invaded and settled in England. The Normans were simply another layer of the same strong, adventurous stock of kindred derivation who had earlier invaded and colonised Northern France from the sea at about the same time as the Danes were invading our country. The land they occupied became known as Normandy, and there they developed a '*patois*' mainly French but retaining Scandinavian elements, which they brought over here. It was the addition of Norman-French to the original Saxon which gave us Modern English, enriching the language considerably.

To the history student the origin of our Anglo-Saxon race is shrouded in mystery. We can trace them to the German coastlands, Schleswig and Denmark, and further back to the Russian steppes and the shores of the Black and Caspian seas. I quote from W. Macneille Dixon's, *The Englishman*, (published 1938, by Hodder and Stoughton), who asks the pertinent question:

'Who now were the Saxons, and were they a folk of pure or single stock? Probably not. But we may believe that the various tribes grouped under the name, including Angles and Jutes, were near relatives, though with differences in the family — the Saxons florid men, the Jutes with noses we are told of the Jewish pattern. Where these people originally came from no one knows, perhaps from the far Eastern Steppes, but they dwelt, before the migration to England, on the shores of the Baltic and the North Sea ...'

'In remote times they appear to have been very much what they are today. We may safely speak, then, of the Anglo-Saxons as a distinct and separate people, described, and admirably described, by Tacitus, the Roman historian, eighteen hundred years ago.'

William L. Ripley, Ph.D., one of the greatest authorities on Anthropology, in his very valuable work, *The Races Of Europe*, (Chapter 12, 'The British Isles'), published 1900 by Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co, an authority of great merit, writing of the Jutes, states on page 332,

'One more facial type needs to be mentioned. It is commonest in Kent and in the Isle of Wight. It is generally ascribed to a Jutish ancestry\*. Our two upper portraits at page 316 represent this adequately enough. These people are darkish in complexion. The principal peculiarity is their convexity of profile from chin to forehead. The lips are rather thick; the nose is difficult to describe, unless we can agree to call it Jewish. Whether we may, indeed, accept it as Jutish, for we are accustomed to regard the Jutes as near relatives of the Anglo-Saxons, is a matter of question. It is certainly a noticeable type in the South and East of England, where Jutish settlements were common.'

\*Harrison 1883

### **The Name of the People and their Language**

It is important to note that our ancestors called the country '**Englaland**', 'Land of the Angles'. Whether they were called West Saxons, East Saxons or South Saxons, Angles of Mercia, or East Anglia, Jutes of Kent and the Isle of Wight, their collective name for themselves was '**Angle Cynn**', that is '**Angle Kin**', and the language, which was originally one, was called '**Englisc**'.

Saxon, Angle and Jutish rulers all called themselves English, and England's darling, the saintly scholar, Alfred the Great, King of the West Saxons, calls his own language Englisc. He translated the Gospel of St John into Old English.

What is rather astonishing and indeed interesting is that the Celts called the whole lot Saxons. To the Welsh-speaking 'Cymro,' the English language is 'Saesneg'; to the Cornishman (when he spoke Cornish), those on this side of the Tamar were '**Saws**' or '**Sows**', and to the Gael, and even to the ordinary Scot whatever his antecedents, we are, and remain, '**Sasunnach**' by name, and England is '**Sasunn**' or '**Sasuinn**.'

Although it is outside the scope of the present thesis, it is interesting to note that Welsh, Cornish, Gaelic and Manx all have a strong affinity to Hebrew. Authorities — Dr Moses Margoliouth, Canon Lysons, Dr Davies *A Welsh Grammar*, Rev. Eliezer Williams.

It is therefore evident, beyond a shadow of doubt, that the names **Angle** and **Saxon** mean the same thing.

### **Dialects and how they came into use**

Although Jute, Saxon and Angle were all '**English**', and spoke the same fundamental basic '**Englisc**' tongue, variations in accent and pronunciation were in existence before they came over to this dear land of ours — variations which became more accentuated as time went on and the tribes were separated from each other. Regional difference of usage, emphasis, stress, tone and cadence became manifest, and these differences are, for the purpose of our study, dialects.

Even within the bounds of a given county, district and local area, sub-dialects would develop. In our own county as we shall presently see, we have distinct East and West Somerset dialects, and peculiarities of speech even in villages.

The four main dialects of Old English in chronological order of their advent on the soil of England, were these.

1. **KENTISH:** The provincial speech derived from the Jutes who settled in Kent part of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight.
2. **WEST SAXON:** The dialect of the Kingdom of the West Saxons, called WESSEX. This speech was the parlance of the rest of the Anglo Saxons who lived in the South of England as well as those living in the Wessex domain, which included SOMERSET, DEVON, DORSET, WILTSHIRE, BERKSHIRE and part of HAMPSHIRE, SUTHREGE or SURREY, SUSSEX, WESTERN KENT, MIDDLESEX, LONDON and ESSEX were all within this language region. As time went on, each county, in isolation, developed its own peculiar sub-dialect. It is these sub-dialects that we refer to as dialects today.





3. **MERCIAN:** The speech prevalent between the River Thames and the River Humber. It includes the counties of OXFORD, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE, GLOUCESTERSHIRE, WARWICKSHIRE, WORCESTERSHIRE, STAFFORDSHIRE and the Eastern and Midland counties generally.
4. **NORTHUMBRIAN:** The language of the area between the Humber in North Lincolnshire and the Firth of Forth in Scotland. Includes YORKSHIRE, LANCASHIRE, COUNTY DURHAM, NORTHUMBERLAND, CHESHIRE, WESTMORELAND in England and much of the Lowlands of Scotland. Braid Scots is a development from the Anglian tongue of the Lothians, and forms the basis of the present day speech of Scotland. It is, however, a language in its own right.

Nicolaisen tells us of the founding of the Bernicia Kingdom in AD 549.

‘Since there have been speakers of English in Scotland for well over 1,300 years, the place-names created in the early phrases of the linguistic stratum can hardly be described as belonging to the ‘youngest’ names on the Scottish map. These early names, coined by the people we call Angles rather than English are not only illustrative of the considerable historical depth of the English contribution to Scottish nomenclature; but are also the only usable linguistic evidence available of the earliest English settlements in Scotland.’

W.F.H. Nicolaisen: *Scottish Place-Names; Their Study and Significance* (Early English names in Scotland) London: Batsford 1976.

## **Influence**

There can be no doubt that Saxon speech was influenced by the Celtic presence. Although only a few words, usually of domestic significance crept into English from Welsh and Gaelic, the spirit of the early British Church, a sacred heritage, merged into the Saxon fabric especially at Glastonbury. Celt, Saxon, Dane and Norman, close relatives, blended their traditions in holy Glastonbury, leaving us a rich and beautiful heritage.

## **THE MOST IMPORTANT EARLY DIALECT**

### **West Saxon**

Computerised ignoramuses using unfamiliar jargon criticise the ‘sound’ of the Somerset dialect little realising that they are desecrating sacred preserves. Their impious disapproval and condemnation of the homely speech is tantamount to the rejection of the very parent of the language called English which all the world wants to learn, foreigners coming over here in droves annually to acquire the tongue that Milton and Shakespeare spoke.

Be it known then that of all the Saxon dialects the most notable and consequential from the point of view of the future of English is that of the West Saxon, the speech of Wessex of a thousand and more years ago. Its importance is manifest in that it was very much more fully represented in literature, lore and scholarship than any other dialect, in all periods of development from the ‘primitive’ stage through early and late Old English. Did not the erudite and saintly King Alfred use it as his

medium for presenting the English people with the first translation of John's Gospel, as well as his 'dooms' or laws?

One can say that West Saxon, from which our East and West Somerset dialects are directly derived, and which, with local variations, was the common speech of the South of England from London to Devon, is the chief study and inquiry of philologists and etymologists.

May I inform the scoffer, and this is an age of scoffers in every field of human activity and endeavour, that the dialects of East and West Somerset, are the very quintessence, pith, marrow, and substance of our mother tongue, and that many of the words and phrases which raise a laugh in ignorant circles, are purer specimens of the English language than the words that are used here to narrate the story of their origin and derivation.

### **WEST SOMERSET DIALECT: THE SAXON COLONISATION OF THE LAND**

West Somerset interests the writer most for obvious personal reasons, and also because he has devoted a considerable amount of time to studying it in some considerable detail. The West Saxon language is the parent of the dialects of both East and West Somerset although the former has become more modified in the modern sense than the latter. West Somerset speech is fundamentally pure Saxon with moderate Norman-French influence.

A word must be said about the arrival of the Saxons and their complete colonisation of the County. Somerset was the settlement of a single people or tribe called the 'Somersætas', who gave their name to the Shire. Because Somerset, like Dorset, derives its name from a tribal unit it was felt unnecessary to add the suffix 'shire' to the name; but in actual fact Somersetshire has been in common use from remote times, and the county is referred to as thus in the 'Saxon Chronicle'.

When the Saxons made themselves masters of the land which they called England, they entered Somerset making it part of the Kingdom of Wessex. Its subjugation was accomplished firstly by Ceawlin, who, by AD 577, conquered North Somerset between the Avon and the Axe, after defeating the Britons at Deorham in Gloucestershire. The Vale of the English, Englishcombe, indicates

the limit of the first invasion. The second spearhead went beyond the Wansdyke when the Saxons under Cenwealh defeated the Britons in AD 638, probably at Penselwood. Somerton now became the capital of the Somersætes. The third and final stage, as far as Somerset is concerned, was undertaken by King Ina (688-726), who subdued the rest of the county, forcing the Wealas (Welsh), whose ruler was Geraint, into Devon, from which they were finally forced beyond the Tamar into Cornwall. Taunton, the capital, was built as a fortress to keep them at bay. The colonisation was rapid, thousands pouring into the Vale of Taunton Deane to farm the rich, fertile soil.

An interesting point about the dialect of West Somerset, which brings one immediately into the Saxon setting, is connected with the almost invariable rule that all common English words beginning in 'F' are spelt with 'V', and all words commencing with 'S' are spelt with 'Z', if of Teutonic derivation. French and other words of foreign origination with identical initials keep their sharp precise form as is the case with 'file' meaning a bundle, roll or list, a word of old French source, the pronunciation of which is always *fuy'ul*. On the other hand, 'file' meaning a rasp, spelt in the same way, is always *vuy'ul* (Dutch *vijl*). There is an obvious marked link between our dialect and Dutch, and even more so with Frisian, and one may say, (our authority being Frederic Thomas Elworthy), that for all literary words in 'f' and 's' having their counterparts in Dutch, our Western English dialectal pronunciation of the initial is the same. However, there are some exceptions.

There are hundreds of words in the dialect that have either been lost to the modern English tongue or are archaic, though some words remain, like 'barton', a term which more precisely means a cattle enclosure; but this is often applied to a farm and homestead, and is peculiar to Somerset, although once used in Sussex as well.

An interesting and familiar word is 'waps' or 'wops' (wopsie) for the stinging insect: This is pure Saxon, from *WÆPS*, and is more correct etymologically than our modern *WASP*.

It is, of course, impossible, in a short essay, to deal at length with the intricacies of grammar. We know, however, that 'the possessive case of nouns in West Somerset is formed and used as in ordinary

English', and that adjectives of quality are fascinating because of their descriptive nature.

Incidentally the differences between the eastern and western divisions of the dialect are slight, except that the western is by far the richer in words. The vocabulary is indeed copious and abundant, and much more attention has been given to it than to the eastern.

I maintain that the dialects of both East and West Somerset are Saxon in every respect, pronunciation and everything else. There are a few odd words that are relics of the language of the Celts. The Britons were driven back, first to the other side of the River Parrett and then into Devon, and thereafter across the Tamar into Cornwall, where their descendants whom we lovingly call 'Cousin Jacks' live to this day. This does not mean to say that there was not some intermarriage, Racially the two peoples were akin, and the fusion was complete in one generation.

The boundary between the two varieties of the Somerset dialect is the Quantock range, and is due to the separation of one group of Saxon farming folk from another. To illustrate the varieties in a single dialect, I have selected my own surname as an example of the subtle way in which pronunciation varies. The word is of Norman derivation, and in the case of my own cognomen is a variant of 'covert'. In the hill district it is pronounced 'kyue'ert', but in the Vale district it is 'koo'urt'. The word is pronounced in these two different ways with reference to a farmyard or enclosed yard for cattle, sometimes called a bullock-court.

### **Summary to sum up:**

The evidence of philology is that the Somerset dialect is derived from the West Saxon language, an honourable 'progenitor'; which, in its turn, provided much of the basis of our modern world-wide English language.

The Somerset 'sound' is not a matter for jesting and we have every reason to be proud of such an honourable linguistic background. In spite of the pundits of this materialistic and critical age, we will I am sure, continue to love the sound of the speech that recalls our dear old Zomerzet Hwome, which may God preserve. I conclude with a poem in dialect which brings out so well the mingled sentiment and dynamism, as well as the beauty of expression so peculiar to our Somerset folk.

## **IN ZOMERZET DOWN TO THE WEST**

*-There's a land where the zunzheen do linger  
O'er moorland, in valley, on hill;  
Where breezes zweet-zented do ripple  
The cow-pond, the river, the rill:  
Where cowlslips do grow in the grass-grounds,  
Where banks wi' blue vi'lets be drest:  
Thik land's betwixt Exmoor an' Mendip.  
In Zomerzet down to the west.*

*There's a spot where the mim'ry do linger,  
Where heart-strings be ever in tune,  
Where blackbirds do zing in the archet,  
Where hay do lay zun-kiss'd in June;  
Where golden-chains, laloc, an' chestnut  
An' apple-blooth's zeed at their best:  
Thik spot's betwixt Exmoor an' Mendip.  
In Zomersset down to the west.*

*There's a time when the yaller corn's woven,  
When reapers do gather the store,  
In calm days when zwallers be thinken  
O'vlitten to zome vur-off shore;  
When the zun in his glory a-zinken,  
Do drow sheades o'er God's Garden o'rest,  
Down hwome, betwixt Exmoor an' Mendip.  
In Zomersset down to the west.*

John Mackie

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