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Scholars and Critics.

:IMPRINT: Mount Pleasant, MI : The Association, c1999-

:ARTICLE: Alter: Translating from the Ancient: The Hebrew Bible

:VOL: 5 :NO: 2 :DATE: 2003 :PAGES: 172-78

:VERIFIED: <TN:65566>OCLC ISSN: 1523-9012 [Format: Serial]

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TRANSLATING FROM THE ANCIENT: *The Hebrew Bible*

Robert Alter

In one central respect, the translations of the Bible that proliferated in the second half of the twentieth century have been oddly out of synch with recent translations from other ancient literatures. Until well into the twentieth century, the general procedure for translating the Greek and Latin classics had been to recast them according to the poetics and the stylistic norms of the translator's own age. The heroes of Pope's *Iliad*, as has often been observed, sound rather like English Augustan gentlemen, and both they and the Homeric narrator are made to speak in heroic couplets because to Pope and his contemporaries this highly wrought, elegant poetic form seemed the only acceptable one for narrative verse assumed to have dignity and gravity. This repeated procedure of transforming the ancients into contemporaries was vigorously rejected beginning in the early post-World War II era, with Richmond Lattimore's version of the *Iliad* setting a strong new precedent that others would variously follow. Perhaps the reason, as Hugh Kenner suggested in *The Pound Era*, was the imaginative assimilation by twentieth-century writers and translators of the revolution in consciousness effected by archaeology. The past was now no longer deeply recessed in time, available only through a layered accretion of literary mediations, for its artifacts and utensils—the sort of sword Achilles would have wielded, the sort of cruse from which Priam might have poured libations—were there to be seen, rescued from oblivion and restored for exhibition to our own material reality. Translators were now more conscious that archaic cultures had their own distinctive textures and values manifested in the poetry they produced, and that English versions of these ancient texts might be devised to intimate in a readable modern language the roughness, the robust concreteness, the sheer cultural otherness of the world embodied in the texts.

In this very period, English translations of the Bible were moving in precisely the opposite direction, with for the most part lamentable consequences. Let me try to explain why this difference should have occurred. In

English, for almost four centuries we have had what can be justifiably regarded as a canonical translation of the Bible. The King James Version is of course a magisterial achievement, and without it the whole course of English literary style over the past four centuries would have been quite different, and no doubt poorer. There are, however, serious problems with the King James Version. One of these is not its fault but the simple result of the passage of time: in the course of almost four hundred years English itself has changed, and some of the language of this grand old translation is no longer generally intelligible, or at least risks being misunderstood (e.g., *meat* in the KJV, a term that once referred to food in general, is likely to make many modern readers think of a butcher's shop). A graver problem is that biblical Hebrew now is much better understood than it was in Christian Hebraist circles in the early seventeenth century, and it must be said that the KJV abounds in local inaccuracies and is guilty of more than a few real howlers. A good many of these were corrected in the Revised Version (first edition, 1885, with successive revisions till 1952), which also tones down the archaic character of the English, and which became the English Bible of choice for many readers over several generations.

Modern translators, armed with the sharp tools of Semitic philology and the manifold finds of recent archaeology, were excited by the idea of discarding the KJV altogether and starting from scratch to create a truly modern and accurate version of the Bible. Most of them worked in scholarly committees convened by ecclesiastical authority (Protestant, Catholic, Jewish) but, alas, in a cultural climate in which the members of such committees no longer possessed the rich sense of literary language displayed by the scholars convened under King James, and also lacking, as a matter of choice, a model of genius on which to draw, as the KJV translators abundantly drew on Tyndale. At the very moment when translators from the Greek were seeking a vivid stylistic evocation of the archaic Mediterranean world, the new translators of the Bible were doing their best to make it sound as though it were composed around 1960 by a group of writers with the stylistic grace of authors of bureaucratic memoranda or of instructions for assembling bicycles. All sorts of linguistic registers were tumbled together; over against the beautiful cadenced compactness of the Hebrew, the language of the

translations was often otiose and generally arhythmic. Most pervasively, the translators labored to make things crystal clear to the modern reader by rendering the same term a dozen different ways according to context, by offering explanatory paraphrase instead of real translation, and, to invoke an appropriately ugly linguistic term, by "disambiguating" a set of literary texts whose profundity and beauty inhered in the knowing cultivation of ambiguities.

Let me propose, on the basis of my own continuing experience as a translator, an agenda for representing the Bible in English that might do some justice to the literary power of the original. The first principle would be that one cannot altogether ignore the precedent of the King James Version. I have to confess that when I was working on my version of Genesis in the mid-1990s, I was not conscious that the KJV entered into my considerations, though after the fact I realized that it had. The KJV has been so compelling as the vehicle through which English readers have known the Bible, including readers who became major English and American writers, that as an accomplished fact of cultural history any English version of the Bible that behaves stylistically as though the KJV had never existed is not entirely readable as a literary translation of Scripture. (Perhaps such a translation might serve as an exegetical or theological tool, but that is quite another matter.) And one must recognize that the KJV, whatever its faults, got one central thing right: it adhered to a pervasively literal conception of translation (out of a conviction we need not share that every single word of the ancient text was divinely inspired), and this literalism led it, often perhaps unwittingly, to reproduce in English many of the significant literary patterns of the Hebrew, and even to intimate some of the otherness of ancient Hebrew culture—for example, in the literal rendering of Hebrew idioms, some of which then would be naturalized as English idioms. I am of course not advocating that translators of the Bible should follow the practice of Borges' Pierre Ménard, who through painstaking labor and revision reproduces *Don Quixote*, but with a new modern meaning, word for word. It is the strategy rather than the specific choices of the KJV that is still worth emulating, at least in part. The KJV in its literalism is concrete the way the Hebrew is concrete ("seed," for example, and not "progeny," "descendants,"

or “posterity”). It is rhythmic because the seventeenth-century translators did not have to be told that a literary style, like a heart, which lacks a rhythmic beat is dead, though the KJV’s cadences are often orotund in ways that are more Jacobean than biblical, and that there may be ways of better approximating biblical compactness in syntax and sound.

Having recognized the KJV as an ineluctable precedent, I would like to lay out a series of guiding principles for translators. These are not offered in a spirit of legislative arrogance, for my own work in translating the Bible repeatedly reminds me that the particular principle is often not easy to follow, either because no happy English solution suggests itself or because, in the specific context, following the principle yields a result that sounds awkward or even absurd.

Make it old. This does not mean that a modern translation of the Bible should be quaintly archaic, sporting “anent”s and “forsooth”s. Nevertheless, we are dealing with texts composed in the early Iron Age, and which probably reflect a specialized literary vocabulary at a certain distance from the vernacular Hebrew of their own age, so it makes no sense to have them sound in English as though they were written the day before yesterday. What this means practically is adhering to a diction that can appear more or less timeless, with some willingness to use slightly older terms and formal devices (such as syntactical inversion, when it is a visibly expressive device in the Hebrew) and an avoidance of language that is too obviously contemporary (one should not, for example, as one recent translation does, have Joseph providing “rations” in Egypt, as though he were an army quartermaster). Biblical Hebrew itself incorporates at least three different historical strata: the standard, lexically restricted language of the narrative prose; occasional gestures toward the vernacular in the dialogues; a more archaic diction in the poetry. I know of no English version, including the KJV, that respects these differences. If a poem uses a poetic term for “enemy,” it should be rendered as “foe” or something similar. If in the one-line verse inset that introduces the Deluge, the *'arubot* of the heavens are opened, these need to be “casements,” not “windows,” for it is a rare Hebrew term used only in poetry and, on philological grounds, probably already felt to be archaic when the story was composed.

Keep it simple. Biblical narrative limits itself, probably out of literary convention, to a rather small vocabulary, surely a good deal smaller than the one that would have been in currency in everyday Israelite life, and manifestly smaller than the lexicon drawn on for poetry. The writers make a virtue of this limitation by playing on different meanings of the same term, by a punning invocation of other terms similar in sounds, and by the deployment of reiterated words as thematic markers (what Buber and Rosenzweig called *Leitwortstil*). A translator should try to replicate this artful simplicity, though it is not feasible to do so with perfect consistency. The word 'adamah, for example, cognate with 'adam, human being, which appears in Genesis 2, means "soil," and as far as possible, I represent it in its many recurrences with that same English term. But, alas, it also means "land" or "country" and sometimes "earth," so there are some contexts in which it would be odd or downright misleading to translate it as "soil." By and large, biblical Hebrew avoids specialized vocabularies, using instead some general term to serve the technical purpose. The verb *paqad* means to reckon or count, to muster, to requite, to single out (KJV, "to visit"), to take a census, and a good deal more. Given this semantic multiplicity, it is hardly feasible to render *paqad* in all cases with the same English term, but at least one can avoid explicitly technical language in the English, which would give the texts a modern coloration they do not have. Thus, in the census lists in the early chapters of Numbers, I avoid the word "census" and instead render the noun derived from *paqad* as " reckonings," in this way imitating the Hebrew's use of an ordinary term that often functions in contexts unrelated to censuses.

Be concrete. Biblical Hebrew exhibits a pervasive feature roughly analogous to what Bruno Snell explains about Homeric Greek in *The Discovery of the Mind*. Abstract concepts are for the most part represented through concrete images and, especially, images taken from body parts. I have already mentioned the recurrent instance of "seed," a vehicle of biological reproduction shared by man with the vegetal world. When God invites Abraham to look at the night sky splashed with stars and know that his seed will be as multitudinous as these, the visual continuity with semen is palpable, all the more reason to keep "progeny" out of the picture. A more difficult challenge for the translator is another recurrent term, *nefesh*. The KJV often

renders this, following the Vulgate's *anima*, as "soul," but in fact there is no biblical word for a distinct entity called the soul. The primary meaning of *nefesh* is "life-breath" (rather like Homeric *psyche*). By extension it is a term for "life"; by metonymy it refers to the throat, the passageway for the life-breath (the Psalmist says, quite concretely, "the waters have come up to the throat," not the soul). Perhaps the trickiest extension of this very common term is its use as an intensive form of the personal pronoun. There is no equivalent in English, and in some contexts I have represented it as "very self," but that does not always work. The rule of thumb, in any case, is to avoid abstraction, a habit of modern thought alien to the Hebrew.

Be compact. The stylistic force of the Bible is inseparable from its terrific concision. There is a structural disparity between modern English, an analytic language, and biblical Hebrew, a synthetic one (in which, for example, the grammatical subject of a verb is indicated by conjugation and the object by an accusative suffix, so that a single word serves where three or four are required in English). For anyone used to reading the Bible in the original, all English versions, including the KJV, sound too wordy. A translator is necessarily constrained by the structure of the target language, but he or she should surely exercise constant resourcefulness in getting rid of extra words and at least approximating the concision of the Hebrew. Compactness also pertains to the number of syllables. Most biblical words are of one, two, or three syllables, so polysyllabic Latinate words in an English version are alien to the stylistic texture of the Hebrew. (Avoiding abstractions will eliminate many such terms.) When I rendered the fleeing David's breathless prayer in 2 Samuel 15:32 as "Thwart, pray, the counsel of Ahitophel," I was especially happy to have hit upon "thwart" because of its phonetic compactness, its simplicity, and its close correspondence in meaning to the Hebrew verb. (The KJV here has "turn into foolishness," a mouthful of words, and a mis-construction at that.) Favoring compact language also helps to give the English the rhythmic integrity I mentioned.

Honor Hebrew syntax. One of the fundamental sins of contemporary translators of the Bible is to repackage every sentence to conform to the norms of modern English. Biblical Hebrew is predominantly paratactic, eschewing subordinate conjunctions and refusing to stipulate relations

of causality, qualification, or subordination between contiguous clauses. The ambiguities and the emphases generated by this paratactic style are among the glories of biblical prose, and my own experience is that in all but a few instances it is perfectly feasible to reproduce this parataxis in readable literary English. There are, of course, distinguished practitioners of parataxis among modern English stylists. When one biblical scholar objected to me that English “and” cannot bear the same weight as its biblical equivalent, I pointed out to him that “and” is a key recurring word in Molly Bloom’s soliloquy, surely one of the greatest extended pieces of poetic prose in modern English. Finally, biblical syntax is often expressively flexible. When old Jacob berates his sons for having left Simeon a hostage in Egypt, he begins by saying, in my version, “Me you have bereaved.” That precisely mirrors the Hebrew, which abandons the standard practice of putting in the pronominal object of the verb as a suffix and instead places the accusative pronoun emphatically before the verb, *'oti shikaltem*, a neat expression of Jacob’s narcissism as a histrion of paternal grief.

This list could be extended, but what it implies for the translator is a single two-sided strategy: scrupulously respect the literary distinctiveness of the Hebrew, and dare to push English, with a due sense of regard for idiomatic aptness, beyond its conventional modern contours.