

Robert Alter and the Art of Bible Translation

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The success of a translation, in my view, is defined by the extent to which it is able to move an audience closer to its source text. The integrity of a translation, on the other hand, lies in the faithfulness with which the translator adheres to his or her particular principles. Since these principles—especially in the case of English translations of the Bible—are usually spelled out, serious readers are able to gauge just what a translator has accomplished.

In Robert Alter's case, he has made his goal clear in the articulate introductions to his Bible translations. In one passage, he characterizes his work as "an experiment in re-presenting the Bible—and, above all, biblical narrative prose—in a language that conveys with some precision the semantic nuances and the lively orchestration of literary effects of the Hebrew and at the same time has stylistic and rhythmic integrity as literary English" (Alter 2004, xvi). Alter has long demonstrated that he is a perceptive reader of the Hebrew text, and his explanatory notes are often illuminating in their discussion of the text's rhetoric, style, and tone. But literary criticism is not the same as translation. To put it another way, being a perceptive reader is not the same as being an accomplished performer in print. I have tried on numerous occasions to sit down with Alter's translations and read them aloud, and to date I rarely experience them as echoes of the Hebrew text. My specific objections fall into several related categories. I will begin by examining narrative, focusing on *The Five Books of Moses* and *The David Story*.

Alter frequently speaks of "cadence" in both languages, which raises the question of how he *hears* the text. From the layout in these books, he appears to perceive it in fairly long blocs of material, occasionally broken up into paragraphs, not unlike narrative texts in English. Here is an example from the opening pages of Genesis (1:7–10), within the creation story:

And God made the vault and it divided the water beneath the vault from the water above the vault, and so it was. And God called the vault Heavens, and it was evening and it was morning, second day. And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered in one place so that the dry land will appear," and so it was. And God called the dry land Earth and the gathering of waters

He called Seas, and God saw that it was good. (Alter 2004, 17–18)

In contrast to what Alter has done here, the Hebrew text of Genesis 1 is aurally quite dramatic. The “days” of creation divide up both logically and sonically, and reinforce a central point in this chapter, namely, that the creative activity of God brings order out of chaos. Some kind of break scheme that permits the hearer to perceive the embedded orderliness (here it should occur after “second day”) is therefore imperative, which Alter’s run-on English text ignores. In addition, the periodic refrains—Alter’s “And God said,” “and so it was,” “and God saw that it was good,” “and it was evening and it was morning”—punctuate the heard text, and should ideally be indicated in a printed form that facilitates reading aloud, as below:

God made the dome

and separated the waters that were below the dome from the waters that
were above the dome.

God called the dome The Heavens.

There was setting, there was dawning: second day.

God said:

Let the waters under the heavens be gathered to one place,
and let the dry land be seen!

It was so.

God called the dry land Earth, and the gathering of the waters he called
Seas.

God saw that it was good. (Fox 1995, revised])

A second feature of Alter’s translational style is his constant use of “and” (Hebrew *waw*) to reflect the paratactic, co-ordinate style of biblical Hebrew. This was introduced into English by the first great Bible translator in the language, William Tyndale, who used it judiciously, but was fully expanded in the famous rhythms of the King James Version. As Alter notes, virtually all modern English translations opt for a more hypotactic paradigm, making use of subordinate clauses to provide a more congenial English style. Alter’s decision to restore parataxis in a contemporary translation rests on two arguments, which he develops at length especially in the “Introduction” to *The Five Books of Moses* (2004): first, that this style reflects biblical thinking, where it is left to the hearer/reader to establish the precise relationship between actions; and second, that one hears the “ands” in the text as they are read. Excising them in translation, he observes, “produces—certainly to my ear—an abrupt, awkward effect in the sound pattern of the language, or to put it more strictly, a kind of narrative arrhythmia” (Alter 2004, xxvii).

Although I agree that parataxis is an important feature of biblical narrative

style,¹ I do question how it may best be put into practice in translation. As Alter is well aware, and occasionally demonstrates in these books, the Hebrew particle *waw* frequently carries other, subtler meanings beyond “and,” including “but,” “then,” “while,” and “now” (the latter in the sense of introducing a new fact or background into the narrative). It can also be an element in the construction known as hendiadys, where two nouns are joined to produce a meaning equivalent to adjective + noun. (Alter acknowledges this, for instance, in Gen. 23:4, where he renders a key phrase as “a sojourning settler,” and points out in a note that the literal Hebrew is “sojourner and settler” [Alter 2004, 113]). Additionally, one may question whether, in fact, an audience always hears the *waw*, which is typically the first element of consecutive verbs in biblical Hebrew. Is the common *wayyomer* (which begins virtually all biblical conversations) to be rendered every time as, “And he said,” often implying an afterthought or something added, or rather simply as, “He said”? Given these considerations, retaining “and” in the majority of cases is often to misconstrue the text. While Alter’s usage succeeds in conveying a sense of forward movement and hurriedness in a number of places (e.g., his citation of Gen. 24:16-20 in his introduction to that book²), in other places, indeed, in many others, it internally connects passages in ways that sound muddled and even reminiscent of a small child’s way of telling a story—surely not what the biblical writers had in mind. Here are two examples from *The David Story*:

And Israel went out in battle against the Philistines, and they encamped by Eben-ezer, while the Philistines were encamped at Aphek. And the Philistines drew up their lines against Israel, and the battle forces were deployed, and Israel was routed by the Philistines, and they struck down in the lines about four thousand men. (1 Sam. 4:1-2; see Alter 1999, 21)

In Alter’s reading, the second sentence’s four “ands” tie the action together, but they hardly qualify as any kind of narrative style in English, however well-meant may be the intention to reflect the “consecutive” nature of the Hebrew. The second example:

And David’s time to die drew near, and he charged Solomon his son, saying: “I am going on the way of all the earth. And you must be strong, and be a man....you yourself know what Joab son of Zeruiah did to me.... And you must act in your wisdom, and do not let his gray head go down in peace to Sheol.” (I Kings 2:2, 5-6; see Alter 1999, 374–376)

Here the translation has the effect of distorting the emotional content of David’s final advice to Solomon. The Hebrew which it represents by “*And you must be strong*” and “*And you must act*” would be better served by the

use of “So,” since Hebrew *waw* often signifies consequence and not merely sequence. A general approach to addressing this dilemma will thus involve the careful use of punctuation and of substitute words such as “then” or “but,” to preserve both the rhythmic balance and the connective aspect of the text.³ But passages such as the ones I have brought here appear constantly throughout Alter’s work and, to my ear, produce a flattened English text that often lacks the cadence he seeks to produce.

For a body of work that claims to produce readable English, I find lapses in Alter’s diction that are frequent enough to be jarring. Here is a sampling: “I am about to bring tomorrow locust in all your territory” (Ex. 10:5 [Alter 2004, 366]); “Should a person offend errantly” (Lev. 4:2 [Alter 2004, 556]); “you shall not lie, no man to his fellow” (Lev. 19:11 [Alter 2004, 626]); “you shall put upon your garment an indigo twist” (Num. 15:38 [Alter 2004, 759–760]); “he should lift up the fire-pans from the midst of the burnt-out zone” (Num. 17:1 [Alter 2004, 768]); “all the house of Israel keened for Aaron thirty days” (Num. 20:29 [Alter 2004, 786]); and lastly, describing Moses at his death, “His eye had not grown bleary and his sap had not fled” (Deut. 34:7 [Alter 2004, 1058–1059]). While one can justify some of these choices on philological grounds, English usage and style are casualties in most of them.

There are periodic inconsistencies in Alter’s usage, despite his desire to point out how the repetition of certain Hebrew terms is almost always significant in the text. For example, Ex. 13:21–22 uses a single Hebrew word, ‘ammud, which Alter inexplicably renders as “pillar...pillar... column...pillar” (Alter 2004, 389). More serious are some of his structural inconsistencies relating to word order, in cases such as Ex. 4:10, where Moses rejects God’s call to lead the people out of Egypt. Alter’s “no man of words am I, not at any time in the past nor now since You have spoken to Your servant, for I am heavy-mouthed and heavy-tongued” (Alter 2004, 327) does not echo the Hebrew, in which *anokhi*, “I” or “I myself,” ends both clauses. I would suggest instead a rendering which also speaks to the text’s strong rhythms:

No man of words am I,
not from yesterday, not from day-before, not (even) from when you first
spoke to your servant;
rather, heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue am I! (Fox 1995, 277, revised)

Similarly, in a shorter phrase, Alter represents the Egyptian magicians’ expression of wonder at the Plagues in Ex. 8:15, *etzba’ elohim hu*, with the Yoda-like “God’s finger it is” (Alter 2004, 354), despite the fact that biblical Hebrew really has no regular way to say, “It is God’s finger” other than this

somewhat emphatic construction. Perhaps a simple exclamation point would do better than an awkward inversion.

These types of translation practices, which are repeated throughout Alter's translations of biblical narratives, produce a text which, despite its rootedness in an often sensitive understanding of the Hebrew, does not adequately follow through *as performance*.

With the Psalms, all translators enter a different realm. Not only is the book of Psalms weighty in its length and variety, and not only does it contain difficult and often obscure language, but it also illuminates the human situation in ways that are unforgettably rich and profound. The translator therefore has a double task: to reflect the character and conceptual world of the Hebrew, and at the same time to create sonorities that speak directly to human emotions. No book in the Bible has been part of people's lives as much as Psalms, whether in congregational life or private devotion. A translation must reflect this personal tone, or else it cannot be deemed a success.

For a book aimed at a general audience, Alter's Psalms volume is certainly impressive in its sheer scope. As with his previous translation work, his commentary is detailed and helpful. He has done us a service in emphasizing the concreteness of the Psalms' language, eliminating such well-known but textually misguided terms as "soul" and "salvation."⁴ In the light of these and other contributions, and given his skills as a close reader of the Bible's poetry, Alter might have been expected to produce something new and striking in the translation itself. Yet, as in the case of narrative, I find the results disappointing. Some of the same shortcomings that I noted above—over-reliance on "and" and inconsistencies, odd turns of phrase, and lapses in rhythm—also make their appearance in his version of Psalms.

Questions arise from the very beginning. Alter renders 1:6 with, "For the LORD embraces the way of the righteous, / and the way of the wicked is lost" (Alter 2007, 4). Here "and," once again, does not convey the force of the Hebrew, which would be better echoed by the more commonly-used "but" or even "while." The entire poem, after all, is built on contrasting the behavior and fate of the righteous and the wicked (the same exact situation and structure are found in Psalm 145:20). Similarly, when Psalm 78:67-68 describes how God treats the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel, Alter translates "Yet He rejected the tent of Joseph, / and the tribe of Ephraim he did not choose. / And He chose the tribe of Judah..." (Alter 2007, 279-280). I am at a loss to discern his reason for eschewing "but" in the last sentence, which appears in the climactic lines of one of the Bible's longest self-contained poems about the lessons to be learned from the past. The illustrations

given here are symptomatic of the entire book.

I also find that inelegancies crop up far too frequently. A walk through the book reveals such phrases as “LORD, my God, in You I sheltered” (7:2 [Alter 2007, 18]); “let me hymn the LORD’s name, Most High” (7:18 [Alter 2007, 21]); “I am impassioned of You” (18:2 [Alter 2007, 52]); “my tongue was annealed to my jaw” (22:16 [Alter 2007, 73]); “And now, what I expect, O Master, / my hope is in You” (39:8 [Alter 2007, 139]); and “Our crimes but You atone” (65:4 [Alter 2007, 221]). If Alter had set out to stretch English to unusual limits in order to mimic the Hebrew, these might be understandable, or at least justifiable. But his choices of wording at times contradict his goal of being English-friendly; instead what we find is vocabulary that is strained and unnecessarily refined. For example, do we really need “anneal” for a common Hebrew verb that means “cling, stick to”? Surely a better solution could have been found. In the process, the all-important emotive power of the Psalms, which does surface at points in his translation, is measurably reduced. Could this version be used devotionally? I’m not quite sure.

A final area for consideration is the Bible’s use of syntactical inversion as a rhetorical device of emphasis, which Alter discusses in his introduction to Genesis. Now it is one thing to note a language’s rhetoric, but what happens when the attempt to reproduce it runs aground? For example, when the writer in Psalm 93:2 praises God by putting the descriptor before the subject (Hebrew *mei-’olam attah*), we are left with three choices: “from forever are You,” Alter’s awkward “from forever You are” (Alter 2007, 328), or simply and seemingly in defeat, but clearly, “You are from forever.” This last is conventionally done in translation, and parallel to the “God’s finger” passage cited above. In the case of biblical poetry, it may not always be possible or even necessary to reproduce every feature of the original language in order to convey its force, and attempting to do so may lead in directions that are less than mellifluous.

Any careful reader of such massive volumes, especially another translator such as myself, can nit-pick. My purpose in choosing a few examples from Alter’s biblical translations has been to suggest that he has not realized his admittedly elusive goal. The kind of miraculous *hieros gamos*⁵ he advocates, where the unique flavor of the original is wedded to the strengths of English, has not yet been attained in our time. For me, Alter’s skills as a literary critic are far superior to his skills as a translator.

Notes

1. See the discussion in (Zevit 1998); on page 1, he endorses Alter's way of representing biblical narrative through parataxis in English.

2. See Alter 2004, xxvi:

And she came down to the spring and filled her jug and came back up. And the servant ran toward her and said, "Pray, let me sip a bit of water from your jug." And she said, "Drink, my lord," and she hurried and tipped down her jug on one hand and let him drink. And she let him drink his fill and said, "For your camels, too, I shall draw water until they drink their fill." And she hurried and emptied her jug into the trough, and she ran again to the well to draw water and drew water for all his camels.

3. This is the approach taken by Alviero Niccacci (1990 and 1997).

4. The following essay by Taylor discusses this identical point on page 242.

5. The term was applied to Bible translation by Franz Rosenzweig (1994, 53).

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