

Translating the Bible: A New Approach to an Old Task

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Introduction

Robert Alter's published translations of significant portions of the Hebrew Bible are a direct outgrowth of his well-received literary-critical studies.¹ Three aspects of Alter's translational work stand out. First, his translations of the Torah, the Psalter, and the David story are very sensitive to the details of the Hebrew text. He is consistently in touch with textual and grammatical features of the text, and he is equally alert to features of its composition and texture. At every hand his close reading of these texts in their original language is evident. Second, Alter's translations achieve a high level of literary skill and clarity for the English reader. His translations are remarkably well expressed; they are informed by modern biblical scholarship; and they are very readable. Third, Alter's translations of the biblical text are accompanied by extensive notes that explicate various aspects of the text, mainly from the standpoint of justifying textual or interpretational decisions reflected in his renderings of the text. In this way readers are invited to enter into the decision making that the author went through in order to reach the final result. All readers, whether lay or professional, are likely to benefit immensely from these translations. I warmly recommend them.

But where do these translations stand in relationship to the plethora of other English translations of the Old Testament that are now so readily available? What is it that sets Alter's work apart from similar works, to such a degree that publication of yet another translation of the Bible can be adequately justified? It is clear that Alter's translations have a carefully conceived theoretical framework that defines his method and informs how he proceeds. A casual reader might either overlook or perhaps not understand these theoretical aspects of his work. For that reason, in what follows I wish to call attention to several features that I regard as particularly significant. It will become clear from what follows that while there is much in Alter's approach that I appreciate and with which I heartily agree, there are also reservations that I have about certain aspects of his approach.

Some Strengths

There are many strengths to Alter's work. Here I will select only a few that are particularly evident in his biblical translations.

Fidelity to the Hebrew Text

Those with a high view of the Bible as sacred text cannot help but appreciate Alter's rigorous attempts to capture as accurately as possible the nuances and niceties of the Old Testament in its original language. Alter takes the text seriously, sparing no effort in his attempts to understand it and to find equivalent and effective ways of rendering it into English. He is also blunt in faulting almost all modern versions for failing to provide Bible readers with an adequate feel for the text in its original language. Concerning this failure he says,

There is, as I shall explain in detail, something seriously wrong with all the familiar English translations, traditional and recent, of the Hebrew Bible. Broadly speaking, one may say that in the case of the modern versions, the problem is a shaky sense of English and in the case of the King James Version, a shaky sense of Hebrew. The present translation is 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)

As much as is practical, Alter attempts to retain features of the source text in his translation. In this attempt to replicate as nearly as feasible the contours of the Hebrew text he makes a distinct contribution. At times he even tries to imitate in English the assonance of the Hebrew text. For example, in Genesis 1:1 he renders the Hebrew expression *tohu wabohu* as “welter and waste,” a subtle attempt to reproduce the word-play found here in the original language (Alter 2004, 17).

All of this is a carefully thought-out strategy on Alter's part. He understands the role of a translator in a rather distinct fashion. There is a sense in which it might be said that he wishes to bring the reader to the text, whereas many modern translators might be viewed as bringing the text to the reader. Such differences in self-understanding will lead to significantly different approaches to the task of translation. Nonetheless, the care with which Alter approaches the ancient text and the thought-provoking way in which he renders it into English are characteristics that should be valued and applauded by all.

Keen Literary Insight

One thing that informs and enlivens Alter's translations is that he seems to

know so well the characters of the story he is translating. His summaries of biblical figures are extremely perceptive and well expressed. For example, he sums up the life of Samuel in this way: “The prophet Samuel may have God on his side, but he is also an implacable, irascible man, and often a palpably self-interested one as well.... He is proud, imperious, histrionic—until the very end, when he is conjured up by Saul as a ghost on the eve of the fatal battle at Mount Gilboa” (Alter 1999, xv–xvi). Or of David he says,

Beset by mortal dangers, David is constantly prepared to do almost anything in order to survive: with the help of his devoted wife Michael, wordlessly fleeing Saul’s assassins; playing the drooling madman before the Philistine king Achish; serving as vassal to the Philistines, massacring whole towns in order to keep his real actions unknown to his overlords; profiting politically from the chain of violent deaths in the house of Saul while vehemently dissociating himself from each of the killings. He is, in sum, the first full-length portrait of a Machiavellian prince in Western literature. (Alter 1999, xviii)

It is clear that as a translator Alter has gotten inside the characters of the story. This insight informs in subtle ways his translation of the text.

Alter also has a keen appreciation of the anonymous authors of the ancient texts he is translating. Of the author of the books of Samuel he says,

from 1 Samuel 1 to 1 Kings 2 is one of the most astounding pieces of narrative that has come down to us from the ancient world. The story of David is probably the greatest single narrative representation in antiquity of a human life evolving by slow stages through time, shaped and altered by the pressures of political life, public institutions, family, the impulses of body and spirit, the eventual sad decay of the flesh. It also provides the most unflinching insight into the cruel processes of history and into human behavior warped by the pursuit of power. And nowhere is the Bible’s astringent narrative economy, its ability to define characters and etch revelatory dialogue in a few telling strokes, more brilliantly deployed (Alter 1999, ix).²

Later he again expresses appreciation for this biblical writer, averring that “[t]he person who wrote this story is not only a formidably shrewd observer of politics and human nature but also someone who manifestly delights in the writerly pleasures of his craft and is sometimes led to surprising insights by his exploration of those pleasures” (Alter 1999, xxii). What he says of the author of the books of Samuel might also be said of him. Like the author of Samuel, Alter “manifestly delights in the writerly pleasures of his craft and is sometimes led to surprising insights by his exploration of those pleasures.”

Fluent English Style

The lot of a translator is difficult. To render an ancient text into a modern language in such a way that the translation is both faithful to its source and at the same time fluent and readable in the target language is an immensely complex task. Few people are equipped to do it well. Translations usually do better with one part of this equation than they do with the other. Versions that attain a high degree of correspondence with regard to rendering the technical aspects of the original language are sometimes greatly deficient in English style. The corollary is true as well. Reflecting on the inadequacies of translations, John Denham in the seventeenth century is said to have remarked,

Such is our pride, our folly, and our fate, that only those who cannot write, translate... (Glassman 1981, 17)

The adage does not apply to Alter. In my view, he does a commendable job at both of these levels. His translations are typically accurate and true to the Hebrew text; they are also characterized by a straightforward yet graceful English style.³ Users of these translations will not only grow in their understanding of the biblical text; they will also find themselves reading the Bible with renewed enjoyment and enthusiasm. This is an achievement not easy to come by, as anyone who has attempted translations of ancient texts will probably agree.

Avoidance of Semantic Anachronism

There are certain terms in the theological lexicon of Christianity that have become very familiar due to their long history of usage. These terms include such common words as “iniquity,” “transgression,” “soul,” “salvation,” and many others (Alter 2007, xxxii–xxxiv). The problem that many such English terms present for translators is that often they have come to mean something very different from their Hebrew counterparts. The Hebrew word for “soul,” for example, is often used as a circumlocution for one’s self rather than as a theological reference to the immaterial part of a human being. Yet when many Bible readers see the word “soul,” they immediately think of the familiar theological meaning of this word. Likewise, “salvation” in the Hebrew Bible usually refers to imminent deliverance or rescue from threatening circumstances rather than to spiritual redemption. Yet many readers immediately think of personal redemption when they see this word. When this happens, the proper interpretation of the text has become obscured, or perhaps eclipsed altogether. The fault lies partly with the translation.

When rendering such words, Alter has deliberately avoided English terms that may anachronistically conjure up misleading ideas. Instead, he prefers less theologically oriented terms. While some readers may miss seeing certain familiar words in his translation of the Hebrew Bible, it is his insistence on accuracy that has guided him in these choices. This is a prudent course of action.

Some Difficulties

In what follows I will focus on some reservations I have concerning selected aspects of Alter's approach. I do so in a spirit of keen appreciation for his work overall. Still, there are some features that are worth considering in terms of their adequacy.

Text-critical Conservatism

Before a translator sets about his task, he must first determine exactly what text it is that he will translate. Ancient biblical texts have come to us in a variety of manuscript and versional forms. Unfortunately, there are often serious discrepancies between them so far as the precise wording of the text is concerned. Translators must often arbitrate between these variant readings and offer a rendering based on what seems to be the closest approximation of either the original text or some early stage of that text. Text criticism is thus foundational for any translation that acknowledges the difference between original readings and later scribal accretions or mistakes. A good translator must also be a reasonably good text critic.

In the case of the Hebrew Bible, from the end of the first Christian century onward we find a very uniform type of text (i.e., a proto-Masoretic text). But in the pre-Christian period this uniformity gives way to several competing forms of texts, as attested directly by the Dead Sea scrolls and indirectly by the ancient versions, such as the Greek, Syriac, and Latin. A translator must decide how best to use this variant evidence.

Alter has approached his task with a reluctance to differ with the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible. To be sure, he does on occasion venture to correct the Masoretic text, usually on the basis of either a reading found in the Dead Sea scrolls or in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible known as the Septuagint.⁴ But one senses his reluctance to do so.⁵ In my opinion he does not depart from the Masoretic text as often as the evidence requires.

The Masoretic text is the result of scribal activity that flourished during the medieval period, roughly from the sixth to tenth centuries C.E.⁶ Though the Masoretes were scrupulously careful and unflinchingly conservative in their

handling of the biblical text, it is nonetheless clear that serious difficulties in the transmission of the text had already taken place in the pre-Christian period, long before there were any Masoretes. Consequently, the text that the Masoretes carefully guarded and uniformly reproduced was a text that long before had fallen victim to many text-critical problems, some of them intentional but most of them due to unintentional scribal error.

How does all this affect a translator of these texts? It means that very often—more often than Alter seems willing to admit—a translator must prefer readings that are found, for example, in the Qumran manuscripts or in an ancient version such as the Greek or Syriac or Latin. The Masoretic text is but one text among several, and a translator ought not to show bias toward (or, for that matter, against) that text. All the textual evidence must stand on equal footing, at least in the preliminary stages of investigation and evaluation of readings. Alter, however, expresses his own approach to textual difficulties as follows:

Nevertheless, as a matter of methodological principle I strenuously disagree with the practice of those biblical scholars who put the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint on an equal footing and choose variants between the two strictly on the basis of what seems to them the more attractive reading. The Greek translators obviously had before them an older version of the book than appears in the Masoretic Bible, but there is no reason to assume that it was invariably a better version. And the fact remains that the Greeks were translators, obliged as translators to clarify obscure points, resolve contradictions, and otherwise make the Hebrew text with which they labored intelligible to their Greek readers. (Alter 1999, xxvi)

Alter's general approach is as follows: "In this regard [i.e., toward emendation] I have exerted the greatest caution, again assuming that if the received text made any sense, it should stand" (Alter 1999, xxvii).

This approach, however, is problematic. Such a method can lead to acceptance of faulty readings that, though they may make sense, are not original and should not be preferred. Such a method can also lead to rejection of certain readings that should in fact be preferred over the Masoretic text. For example, in 1 Samuel 11:1 the Masoretic text makes sense. However, a Samuel scroll found at Qumran has a variant reading here that explains the practice of Nahash the Ammonite in gouging out the right eye of his military opponents, a practice that terrified the Israelites who contemplated fighting him. What are we to make of this textual variant? Is it a later addition to the text of Samuel, or is it a part of the original text that was lost in the transmission process? It is hard to say for sure, but a strong case can be made for regarding

it as original. In that case, it should appear in the text of our versions and not as a footnote to the text, which is where Alter (and most others) leave it. In my view, such text-critical conservatism does not serve the reader well. The quest for textual purity should trump timid acceptance of traditional readings every time.

Philosophy of Translation

According to the Talmud, Rabbi Judah made the following rather exaggerated claim:

If one translates a [biblical] verse literally, he is a liar;
if he adds thereto, he is a blasphemer and a libeler.

(b. Talmud, *Kiddushin* 49a; Tosephta, *Megillah* 4[3]:41)

If taken seriously, this counsel of despair puts all translators on the horns of a dilemma: they can either choose to translate the Bible literally and thereby resign themselves to lying, or they can resort to paraphrase and thereby resign themselves to blaspheming. Obviously, neither option, that of becoming a liar or that of becoming a blasphemer, is desirable. Though we might sympathize with the rabbi's anguish regarding the possibility of accurate translation, we cannot agree with his conclusion. Still, there is some truth to the Italian play on words, *Traduttore, traditore*. In other words, translators are traitors.

Prior to the mid-twentieth century, most translators of the Bible adopted a philosophy of translation that, for lack of a better term, might be called formal equivalency. In this approach, translators rendered the text for the most part in a literal fashion, largely retaining the text's lexical and phrasal features unless there was good reason for doing otherwise. The classic example of this approach is the time-honored King James Version of 1611; a more recent example is the stilted but usually accurate American Standard Version of 1901. By the middle of the twentieth century a different approach had taken hold in Bible translation work; it came to be known as dynamic, or functional, equivalence. In this approach translators do not necessarily seek to replicate the lexical and grammatical cadences of the ancient text. Instead, they take greater liberties in accommodating the text to the target audience, attempting thereby to make the Bible more relevant, accessible, and user-friendly to modern audiences. Some form of this latter approach is generally favored by most Bible translators today.

Alter, somewhat surprisingly, aligns himself more with the older approach than with the newer one. One is almost taken back by his advocacy of a strongly Hebraized approach to translation. He says, "If one keeps in mind the strong element of stylization of the ancient language even in its own time,

there is no good reason to render biblical Hebrew as contemporary English, either lexically or syntactically” (Alter 1999, xxviii; cf. Alter 2004, xxxii). Alter’s translations are therefore intentionally on the literal side, avoiding as much as possible the temptation to paraphrase or interpret. An example of this overly literal approach may be seen in Alter’s use of the expression “pisser against the wall” (cf. KJV) in 1 Samuel 25:23, 34 to refer to a male individual. Although it is utilized in the Hebrew text, this is not an expression commonly used in the English-speaking world to identify gender. The Hebrew expression simply means a male rather than a female. Surely a less literal translation would be preferable here. Likewise, in 1 Samuel 20:30 Alter sets forth a very literal translation of Saul’s inflamed reaction to a son he regards as treasonous: “O, son of a perverse wayward woman!” While this translation corresponds to the wording of the Hebrew text, it fails to capture in English the force of Saul’s response. A closer approximation would be “You son of a bitch!,” although some Bible readers might find this rendering a bit surprising. The point is that, given the differences between the source language and the target language, a literal translation is often not preferable for conveying the actual sense of the text.

Alter summarizes his approach as follows: “My notion of an effective translation of the Bible involves a high degree of literalism—within the limits of reasonably acceptable literary English—both in regard to representing the word choices and the word order of the Hebrew.” (Alter 1999, xxix). Such comments are noteworthy, since they seem to harken back to an earlier age and to an older approach. Alter also speaks in stringent terms of the use of lexical variation in Bible translation. He says,

A suitable English version should avoid at all costs the modern abomination of elegant synonymous variation, for the literary prose of the Bible turns everywhere on significant repetition, not variation. Similarly, the translation of terms on the basis of immediate context—except when it becomes grotesque to do otherwise—is to be resisted as another instance of the heresy of explanation. Finally, the mesmerizing effect of these ancient stories will scarcely be conveyed if they are not rendered in cadenced English prose that at least in some ways corresponds to the powerful cadences of the Hebrew.

(Alter 1999, xxviii–xxix)⁷

Concerning his own translation of the Psalms he says,

What I have aimed at in this translation—inevitably, with imperfect success—is to represent Psalms in a kind of English verse that is readable as poetry yet sounds something like the Hebrew—emulating its rhythms wherever feasible, reproducing many of the effects of its expressive poetic syntax,

seeking equivalents for the combination of homespun directness and archaizing in the original, hewing to the lexical concreteness of the Hebrew, and making more palpable the force of parallelism that is at the heart of biblical poetry. The translation is also on the whole quite literal—something that the King James Version has probably conditioned English readers to expect—in the conviction that the literal sense has a distinctive poetic force and that it is often possible to preserve it in workable literary English. (Alter 2007, xxxi)

Alter is thus self-consciously out of step with certain aspects of modern approaches to the science of translating. He prefers a literal translation, not a dynamically equivalent one. He prefers to adhere closely to the Hebrew forms and structures, rather than to adapt the text to contemporary English.⁸ There is a place for such an approach, but not exclusively so.

Alter is particularly blunt in his criticism of translations that blur distinctions between translating a text and explaining it. He rejects attempts to build into translation a layer of interpretation that clarifies for the reader the meaning of the text, labeling such attempts with the pejorative expression “the heresy of explanation.” He says, “The unacknowledged heresy underlying most modern English versions of the Bible is the use of translation as a vehicle for *explaining* the Bible instead of representing it in another language, and in the most egregious instances this amounts to explaining away the Bible” (Alter 2004, xix). His characterization of alternative models of translation as heretical in this regard is intentionally arresting and provocative.

But this language strikes me as a bit extreme and rather unfair. It is one thing not to favor excessive attempts at paraphrase and textual expansion that allegedly distort the meaning of the text. It is quite another thing to besmirch all such attempts to assist the reader, even when they are exercised with discipline and caution. I believe that Alter is too insistent on a literal approach to Bible translation. He is also too condemnatory of certain conventions that have been widely accepted by the modern guild of biblical translators.

Conclusion

Alter’s translations of the Pentateuch, the Psalms, and the David story offer fresh insight into the biblical text. They excel in attention to the semantic niceties of the Hebrew text. They are in touch with contemporary biblical scholarship. And they are for the most part skillfully expressed in effective English style, making them a delight to read. While one might not fully subscribe to all aspects of their theoretical underpinning, particularly with regard to text criticism and translation philosophy, these translations earn their keep. They succeed in leading users into a fresh and engaging reading of the bibli-

cal text. To the degree that they encourage fresh engagement with the text, especially on the part of those who may have thought that they already knew these texts well, the purposes of their author will have been well served.

Notes

1. For a complete list of Alter's published English translations of the Hebrew Bible, see the list of works cited below.
2. Alter regards 1 Kings 1–2, rather than the end of 2 Samuel, as the conclusion of the David story.
3. One is not surprised to find Alter berating modern versions in the area of style. He says, "nothing traduces the power of the original more egregiously than the nonstyle cultivated by the sundry modern versions" (Alter 1999, xxix). Elsewhere he speaks of the "arrhythmia" of modern English translations. He says, "I know of no modern English translation of the Bible that is not blotted by constant patches of arrhythmia" (Alter 2004, xlii).
4. Concerning the date of the Greek translation, Alter speaks too loosely when he refers to the Septuagint as "the Greek translation of the Bible completed during the third century BCE" (Alter 2007, xvi; cf. Alter 1997, x ; xxvi). According to the Letter of Aristeas, which is our main primary source for the origins of the Greek version, it was only the Torah and not the Septuagint as a whole that was translated in the third century B.C.E. The translation of Old Testament books other than the Pentateuch continued over a long period of time. The Septuagint was probably not completed until sometime in the first century B.C.E.
5. For example, Alter says, "This translation is relatively conservative in adopting emendations, and some biblical scholars may look askance at this cautiousness" (Alter 2007, xxxviii). Here he has correctly anticipated criticism of the very sort that I am raising.
6. Alter is inconsistent in his dating of the Masoretic period. Was it "between the seventh and the tenth centuries C.E." (Alter 1999, xxv), or "between the sixth and ninth centuries CE" (Alter 2007, xxxvi)?
7. Some readers of Alter will be surprised to note his defense of what he calls "the cardinal principle, not to translate according to context" (Alter 2004, xxxiii).
8. Alter's literal style of translation is especially evident in his imitation of the paratactic style of the Hebrew text. In his translation of the David story, which comprises fifty-seven chapters of biblical text, all but one chapter (i.e., 1 Samuel 13) begin with the word "and." It is not uncommon to find a dozen instances of "and" within the space of a few verses in his translation. Such use of the conjunction makes for good Hebrew; in English, however, it rather quickly becomes wearisome.

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