An Alter-ed Perspective on the Bible

Scholar Robert Alter Has Issues With Translations of Holy Text

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Good Book Scholar: Robert Alter has changed the way the Bible is perceived as literature.

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As this year marks the 400th anniversary of the King James Version of the Bible, a new English translation might seem a bit late to the game. After all, the KJV is justly celebrated for its eloquence, and the shelves are packed with more recent translations, such as that of the Jewish Publication Society, that draw on modern advances in linguistic and historical scholarship and are written in more contemporary English.

But Robert Alter sees problems with all these translations, which he describes in the introduction to his own 2004 rendering of the Five Books of Moses: “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.”

Alter argues that the KJV is frequently inaccurate, and that both the King James and its successors fail to convey in English the refined narrative style and linguistic rhythms of the Hebrew original. It is an argument that is all the more persuasive because it is backed by groundbreaking contemporary scholarship on the literary artistry of the Bible — namely, his own.

Even to the untrained reader, Alter's translations are both familiar and startlingly different. The language is simple, vigorous and rhythmical, and Alter prefers concrete, often tactile metaphors to the more philosophical renderings of other translators. Thus, in Psalm 63, where both the KJV and the New JPS translate the poet as declaring that his "soul" thirsts for God, Alter translates *nefesh* as "throat," rejecting an abstract term in favor of an image rooted in the trials of desert life.

The resulting text stands as a fresh reminder that the authors of the Bible were not lawyers or philosophers but desert tribesmen living in a stark and often brutal world.

Alter himself, by contrast, is a courtly presence with a bushy halo of white hair and an easy manner — "a genial genius," one friend calls him — that belies his intellectual heft.

"He is the most accomplished Jewish humanist in America," said Leon Wieseltier, A longtime friend of Alter's and literary editor of The New Republic, to which Alter is a periodic contributor.

Alter says that he "stumbled" into his career as a biblical translator, but it is, in many ways, the unification of twin passions that Alter has pursued most of his life: literary scholarship, and Hebrew language and culture.

Like many formative love affairs, Alter's romance with Hebrew began during his adolescence, in post-bar mitzvah classes in his hometown of Albany and at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin. By the time he arrived in New York City in the 1950s to attend Columbia University, he was already conversationally fluent. He chose Columbia, in part, so that he could pursue his Jewish education at the neighboring Jewish Theological Seminary.

JTS was, at the time, the leading institution in the country for Jewish studies, and Alter studied the Hebrew Bible, Talmud and Midrash with some of the best scholars of the day — all in classes conducted in Hebrew. His bible teacher, H.L. Ginsberg, was one of the primary editors of the New JPS translation, which was published over two decades, starting in 1962. Alter also decided, on his own, to master literary Hebrew, reading novels and quizzing himself with Hebrew vocabulary flashcards as he rode the bus to afternoon track practice. As a result, Alter recalled, "I really acquired all the different historical strata of the language."

Meanwhile, at Columbia, and subsequently at graduate school at Harvard, Alter studied under some of the most eminent literary critics of the day, including Lionel Trilling, F.W. Dupee and Reuben Brower. Many of these critics were disciples of New Criticism, a mode of literary study that emphasized close reading of texts as self-contained entities — an approach that would later have a deep influence on Alter's own study of the Bible.

In 1967, Alter moved to California to take a professorship in Hebrew and comparative literature at University of California, Berkeley. Much of his scholarly work has focused on European literature and writers, including Kafka, Stendhal and the picaresque novel, in addition to extensive writings about modern Hebrew literature, and he continues to publish work on modern writers to this day.

It was not until the mid-1970s that Alter turned his literary gaze to the Bible.

“I knew biblical narrative was great, but I didn’t know why,” Alter said. “It seemed so barebones and ostensibly simple.”

At that time, most modern biblical scholarship had focused on source criticism: using linguistic patterns to figure out which parts of the bible were compiled from different historical sources and trying to analyze the differences between those sources. Alter, however, drawing on his training with the New Critics, turned his attention to the literary techniques that recur throughout the bible — the repetition of key words, the reticence of the narrator, subtle variations on conventional scene types — and unite the text into a powerful whole.

The resulting 1981 study, “The Art of Biblical Narrative,” and its subsequent 1985 companion, “The Art of Biblical Poetry,” revolutionized the way that scholars read the Bible.

“It was a revelation for people in the field of biblical studies,” said Ron Hendel, Alter’s colleague and friend at UC Berkeley. “All of a sudden, the literary study of Bible, which barely existed prior to that, was a full-fledged, mature and compelling avenue of inquiry. And he taught everybody how to do it.”

Alter’s scholarship also led, indirectly, to his translation work. Several years after “The Art of Biblical Poetry” was published, an editor at W.W. Norton asked Alter to do a critical edition of either Kafka or a book of the Bible. Alter picked Genesis, but, dissatisfied with all the existing translations, he decided to translate it himself.

Alter says that he expected the translation to be a one-off experiment, “but it turned out to be a rather closer approximation of my fantasies than I assumed it was going to be.”

It was also a hit, and Alter was persuaded to continue translating additional books until, he said, “I had become, willy-nilly, a highly visible translator of the Bible.”

To date, Alter has translated roughly half of the Hebrew Bible, most recently the Wisdom Books of Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes (or Qohelet, in Hebrew), which was released in paperback by W.W. Norton & Company in October. His work has drawn rave reviews in virtually every major English-language publication on both sides of the Atlantic, with praise from literary luminaries such as Harold Bloom and Seamus Heaney.

Extensive scholarly notes accompany all of Alter’s translations, and it is here that Alter says he most deeply connects to his translation as a Jewish, rather than a literary, endeavor.

“Commentary is the Jewish mode of expression par excellence,” Alter said. “I’ve come to feel that there is a certain way in which, in pushing ahead with this enterprise, I’ve become a colleague of Rashi and Ibn Ezra and the Ramban.”

Alter is 76, and he retired recently from his post at UC Berkeley, though he remains in good health and is still an avid tennis player. He is currently working on a translation of the Former

Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings), which he expects to send to his publisher in the spring of 2012 and to publish in 2013. After that, he expects to continue on to the major prophets — Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel — if, as he said, “I remain in good health and enthusiastic.”

Alter says that he is often asked if he intends to translate the entire Hebrew bible. The answer, he explains with a wry smile, is not entirely in his own hands: “That’s basically an actuarial question.”

Anthony Weiss lives and writes in Los Angeles.