

(Mis)Translating the Hebrew Bible: Sacred Texts as Creative Nonfiction

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Most of you are probably familiar with Michaelangelo's sculpture of Moses, which represents, arguably, the most iconic mistranslation in the history of Bible translation. It's from the Book of Exodus, 34:29: Moses is coming down from Mount Sinai with the ten commandments. Here's the mistranslation: in Hebrew, the word for horn and the word ray or radiate look identical, and in Jerome's Vulgate – the most widely influential translation of the Bible – what had said in Hebrew “the skin of his face shone” (קָרַן עוֹר פָּנָיו) was translated to *cornuta esset facies* – “his face had horns.” And this error was immortalized in various artworks, most famously Michaelangelo's Moses. Though this is not the Bible translation I focus on in this essay, I find it to be aptly symbolic of the work that faces any translator of the Hebrew Bible.

For the purposes of this essay, let's agree that the Hebrew Bible is a work of creative nonfiction.¹ But more important for my purposes, let's also agree that the Hebrew Bible is not only a work of creative nonfiction, but also an *anthology* of creative nonfiction. A common trap that translators of this text fall into is the urge to make the text smooth, and also to make it accessible in a contemporary context.

But the fact is that the language of the Hebrew Bible is neither smooth – and by smooth I mean written in a single, stylistically consistent voice – nor is it necessarily easy to grasp if we try to apply our own religious or moral or cultural standards to it. This sounds surprising, right? The Bible is difficult to grasp if we apply our own religious standards to it? To quote the scholar and translator Robert Alter:

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 an explaining away of the Bible. This impulse may be attributed not only to a rather reduced sense of philology, but also to a feeling that the Bible, because of its canonical status, has to be made accessible – indeed, transparent – to all.

¹ When I was preparing for the panel this essay was originally written for, I asked some of my writer/translator colleagues: “Do you think it's OK to call the Bible nonfiction?” I realized that had I an entirely different kind of colleague, this question would be considered offensive, and if had we been at a different kind of conference, I might have asked the opposite question: Is it OK to call the Bible fiction? That said, I want to apologize up front for stepping on anyone's beliefs about the provenance of the Bible.

What Alter is concerned about is the tendency of translators to minimize the fact that the Bible, composed in both Hebrew and Aramaic, comes from number of sources. These sources span literary styles as well as time periods. The fingerprints of the redactors – the people who collected and edited the Hebrew Bible – are all over the text. The stories that make up the text of the Bible, therefore, already show evidence of a kind of tampering in the original – and that’s before the translators begin their own tampering – the smoothing and explaining that I’ve already mentioned.

This brings us to the section of the Bible I want to look at here: every translator’s favorite, the story of Babel. Conveniently, the new translation studies reader *Translation Theory and Practice: A Historical Reader*, edited by Daniel Weissbort and Astradur Eysteinnsson reproduces nine different translations of the text, spanning hundreds of years. I’ve gathered a few of them, along with the Jewish Publication Society’s version, into the handout.

I want to begin this examination with a short poem that serves as a kind of abstract for the rest of this paper:

CREATION MYTH

We were told the story of Babel because the city was half-finished. What flooded through there, what plagued the brickmakers and the brickburners as they ritualized the straw-beating, the mud-pulling, the shaping and molding and matting and patting? Before the rains came, did they run home to beat their children and make love to their slaves? Did they stop at the 7-11 in the middle of the storm to grab a pack of matches and a Slim Jim? When did the people scatter like misunderstood geraniums after the first frost, dropping their petals in formless accusation? Only later, at the hands of the redactors, did Babel become a story of God’s anger. Latest of all was the erasure of God’s caprice, designed to block us from the last recesses of the imagination’s keep, where we curl in a granite cave cold with moss and sweat.²

Anachronisms aside, what this poem does is point at two key aspects of the Babel story that are not evident from most translations.

1. First, the Babel story is actually a good example of the resourcefulness of the redactors – to paraphrase Robert Alter, they transformed a story about a marvel of ancient technology, the ziggurat, into a monotheistic fable. One clue that this story probably came from a source different than other parts of Genesis is that it is plopped down directly after a section of genealogy – a bunch of “begats” – which resumes directly afterward. This chronological hiccup isn’t something that Bible translators choose to tamper with, so it offers us a glimpse into the disparate sources of the Bible. Thus both the chronology and the language of the

² Editor’s note: This is an excerpt from "The War in the North: A Report," which was written while the author was in Israel during the 2006 war with Lebanon.

Babel story really stand out from sections that precede and follow it. (I'll return to that language in a bit.)

2. Second, some scholars believe that the original purpose of the story of Babel was to serve as a kind of just-so story – an explanation story – although there is disagreement as to what it explained. It might have been meant to explain an abandoned city or settlement of some kind; it might have come into existence as a kind of ode to the ziggurat – or both. It's very possible that this story is two stories stitched together, something evidenced by the fact that the narrative alternates between mentioning a city and a tower. So originally, these weren't necessarily stories designed to teach a lesson about an angry God.

But when the redactors of the Bible decided to include this tale in the larger text that they were assembling, they *wanted* to the story to be a demonstration/evocation of God's anger – a cautionary tale rather than just an explanation story. So they made some changes.

One place that we can see the redactors at work begins with this line, which God says, in various versions in English:

- “They will not leave off from all they have undertaken to do.”
- “And now nothing will be restrained from them.”
- “Nothing they plot will elude them.”
- “Nothing that they propose to do may be out of their reach.”

If you take this line out of the context of the story, you don't necessarily get a sense that the people have transgressed. The line could be read as God taking pride in His people, a kind of gloating: “Look what they did! So clever, these people! Nothing can stop them now!”

But the redactors, who were trying to assemble a text that literally put the fear of God into its readers – remember that they were promoting God – probably didn't find this line so helpful on its own. And so we have the next line:

1. “Well then, let us go down and confuse their language there, so that none will discern the language of the other.
2. “...let us go down, and confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.”
3. “Come, let us go down and baffle their language there so that they will not understand each other's language.”

And so on. Now the redactors had achieved a couple of goals: they had demonstrated God's power and the consequences of His displeasure, and they had also created a just-so story of their own regarding the diversity of languages among peoples.

So in attempting to explain something not evident in most translations, I've found an unwitting conspiracy theory of sorts between the redactors of the Bible and the translators who came along thousands of years later – both groups share a parallel desire to manipulate the text.

I want to finish up by looking at the language of the story, particularly an aspect of Hebrew that is very difficult to re-create in English – the importance of sound in the language itself. Hebrew – both Biblical and Modern – is based on a system of roots. Most words are formed by adding prefixes and suffixes to these three- or four-letter roots. The Babel story takes advantage of this aspect of Hebrew to a remarkable degree: The authors of this text, which is itself a story of language, use a very restricted vocabulary – most likely by design. For example, the phrase that is usually translated as some version of “let us make bricks” loses the connection between the verb and the noun, which you might be able to see: **וּלְבִנָּה לְבָנִים**, (*neel-b'NAH le-vay-NEEM*). A more accurate translation would be “Let us brick bricks,” which is followed by the parallel text **נִשְׂרַפָּה לְשִׂרְפָּה** (*nees-r'FAH le-sray-FAH*), or “Let us burn for burning.”

Robert Alter calls the Babel story “a game of mirrors”: Words are echoed and repeated, changing subtly in both meaning and sound thanks to the flexibility of the root system. When the text is read aloud, in fact, the musicality of the language is undeniable. All translators of Hebrew – both Biblical Hebrew and Modern Hebrew – must strive not only to maintain these echoes, but also re-create these particular aural dynamics if they want to retain any sense of the original in the translation.

Clearly, I have only offered a brief take on a very short piece of an enormous text. What I hope I've been able to do is point out just a bit of the thin ice that translators of the Bible have to skate on: The differences between English and Hebrew, compounded by the message-over-medium mindset of most translators of the Hebrew Bible, have led to texts that sometimes end up drastically far from the original. I think that the best way to read this text is by using multiple translations, the way I've begun to do here, allowing the most informative and the richest access to this text.