THE BIBLE IS COMPLICATED

Posted on January 14, 2020 by Eddie

the Bible itself does not generally exhibit the clarity to which its modern translators aspire
Category: Observations

I've just started working my way through The Art of Bible Translation by Robert Alter. It's one of those books which alternately delight and frustrate me. One minute I'm bouncing up and down with excitement at a well-expressed phrase and the next, I'm seething with frustration at what I perceive to be egregious errors. I'll review the whole book when I finish it, but for the moment, I just wanted to highlight a sentence from the first chapter.

> *... the Bible itself does not generally exhibit the clarity to which its modern translators aspire: the Hebrew writers reveled in the proliferation of meanings, the cultivation of ambiguities, the playing of one sense of a term against another, and this richness is erased in the deceptive antiseptic clarity of the modern versions.*
>
> *The Art of Bible Translation p. 10*

BOOM!

Alter is focusing on the Old Testament in his book, but the same thing is true (though, perhaps to a lesser extent, in the NT). These word plays and ambiguities are often incredibly difficult for translators to handle. Sometimes the structures and vocabulary of the target language make it next to impossible to capture the complexities of the original.

However, it isn't just translators who have to worry about these things, preachers have to deal with them, too. Translators are concerned about an audience who will read their publication at some unspecified time in the future - it may be years away. Preachers, on the other hand, have to face the immediate possibility of looking out at a congregation of blank, uncomprehending faces. Because of this, it is easy for preachers to fall into the trap of wanting to explain all of the details of the text, even if this means simplifying complex structures and ideas.

The temptation exists to say that a text either means A or B and that the preacher's preferred interpretation is that it means A. However, there are times when it is not a case of either/or but both/and. Not only that, but there are times when, frankly, no one is quite sure what the original means - in those cases, the preacher should say so (in these situations, the preacher is in a much better place than the translator who has to make a decision).

This can be quite unsettling to a preacher who wants to open up the Bible text and it can feel as if you are not quite doing your job. Surely sorting out the ambiguities and knowing what the complex

bits mean is the role of the pastor-teacher. The thing is, preachers and translators are handling a document that is thousands of years old and which was written over a long period of time in languages and cultures which are very different from our own. Helping people get to grips with this *otherness* is very much part of the role of the translator and the pastor. We do no one any favours when we act as though the Bible was written in English sometime in the C20.

Not only that, but very often it is the word plays, the both/ands, the metaphors and other linguistic complexities that give us a glimpse into the grandeur of a God who transcends the limits of human language and imagination.