BOOKS I HAVE READ: THE ART OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

Posted on January 15, 2020 by Eddie

I found this book rather frustrating and sometimes irritating. But it is a good book and deserves to be read.
Category: Observations

Yesterday, I mentioned thatÂ The Art of Bible TranslationÂ by Robert Alter is one of those books which alternately delight and frustrate me. Well, having finished the book, frustration somewhat outways delight. That isn't to say that it isn't a good book or an important book - it is both, but boy is it frustrating.

The book is a small hardback of 120 pages with a (far too) brief list of suggested reading and a short index. Currently, it will set you back around Â£20 on Amazon and frankly, I'd wait for the paperback or Kindle version. The style is not particularly academic, though, ironically for a book advocating for literary style, I found it rather hard going.

So, let's list the things I didn't like about it, before suggesting why you should read it anyway.

Firstly, the style is rather smug and self-satisfied. You could sum up the whole of the book by saying that all modern English translations are wrong, the Authorised Version sometimes gets it right, but the only reliable translation is the author's own. He may well, of course, be right, but the tone and style are irritating.

Secondly, apart from dismissing The Message as not being worthy of his attention, he doesn't interact with the most popular modern translations of the Bible. I'm sure that were he to have done so, it wouldn't change the thesis of his work, but not having done so leaves the book floating around in an academic arena and not rooted in the experience of those who actually read the Bible on a regular basis.

Thirdly, and most importantly, I disagree with the author about the nature and purpose of the Bible. This book interacts with the Bible as an excellent example of Hebrew literature (despite the title, the book is limited to the Old Testament). The Bible is this, but it is is much more, it is primarily God's revelation of himself to humanity. While preserving literary integrity is a very important aspect of translation, it is not the whole story. Alter hints at this himself when in his dismissal of The Message he writes, "I don't want to dismiss such efforts because they are manifestly devised to make the Bible speak to specific communities that variously regard it as the word of God and may be seeking a sense of immediate relevance".

Elsewhere he complains that translators are unable to use good literary English because they are not immersed in the "novels of Saul Bellow or Ian McEwan or the poetry of W. S. Merwin". To which I would reply, that it's not just the translators who are unfamiliar with these works (if indeed they are)

but so are the vast majority of their readers.

My last complaint is really unfair, but I'll make it anyway. The book limits itself to looking at English translations of the Old Testament. However, the vast majority of Bible translation being carried on today is not into the English language. Appeals to historical language use and literary classics don't make much sense when you are translating Scripture into a language with no written literature. As a translator, I was very conscious or literary style as I was aware that our work might well be setting the standard for future literacy in Kouya. It is also unfortunate, that the author does not engage with some of the translators' guides produced by UBS on topics such as Hebrew Poetry. He may well have been dismissive of them, but the fact that he doesn't even mention them seems to indicate that he is not fully abreast of the field that he is writing about.

So, with that extensive list of *caveats*, I would still suggest that this book is worth reading.

Firstly, although the literary aspects of translation that the book focuses on are not the only important issue in Bible translation, they are important and are somewhat ignored. Questions such as syntax, wordplay and rhythm are things that translators need to take into account and this book provides good examples of why this is the case.

Secondly, the book provides lots of fascinating examples of the way in which the Hebrew text actually works. There is plenty in here to intrigue and inform regular Bible readers. Just a couple of examples from the chapter on dialogue will suffice to illustrate this.

Alter points out that proportionally dialogue takes up much more space than narrator's reports in the narrative books of the Old Testament. The narration tends to be used to speed up the story and move through things quickly "two decades in the life of Jacob and Esau are telescoped into a single Hebrew noun and verb". However, dialogue is used to slow the story down and to develop the relationships between the characters.

> *For the biblical writers, then, it was clearly of paramount importance to show people relating to each other through speech.*
>
> *p. 103*

This is a fascinating observation, of relevance to the translator, but I would take it a step further and

say that it gives us an insight into the way in which the Triune God views both revelation and humanity. Relationships are far more important than we Westerners tend to believe.

A second example comes from Abraham's interaction with Abimelech in Genesis 20. This whole section (p. 106 ff.) is fascinating, but I want to highlight one short insight. When Abimelech responds to God's condemnation of him for taking Sarah into his harem, he says "will you slay an innocent nation (*goy*)?". This is a rather strange phrase, which could be taken as Abimelech speaking of himself as representing the nation. However, Alter points out that these words echo Abraham's prayer to God to preserve Sodom and Gomorrah in the immediately preceding chapter. Is the narrator using this dialogue to create a deliberate contrast?

So, who should read this book? To be honest, I don't think it is one for the average reader, though anyone who has a deep interest in English Bible translations would enjoy it. However, I would say that Bible translators and students of the Hebrew Bible would do well to get a copy and spend some time studying it. Despite all of my reservations, it is a worthwhile read.