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Translator as Storyteller: A Study of the Book of Esther

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Abstract

The oral qualities of the Hebrew Bible diminished over time as it was written down and codified. This paper examines one book of the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Esther, and how translations shape its use. This book is particularly interesting to the storyteller because the Book of Esther is still recited as a story as part of the Jewish festival of Purim. Since the requirements of the festival include the recitation of this story, the book's translation influences the celebration significantly. The ultimate point of this paper is to highlight the importance of the storyteller in the translation process.[1]

"A translator cannot hope to present the poet's work unaltered." (Friar 1971:198)

1. Introduction

There are translations of the Bible in many languages, from English to Maori. While scholars have studied the reasoning of the translator and the purposes of the publication, what has received inadequate attention is the oral nature of the Bible. After all, portions of the Bible were originally in oral form, later written and codified. This article investigates the role of the translator as the transmitter of the Bible. This paper explains how translators of the Book of Esther into English adopt the role of storyteller. Why the Book of Esther? The book is still recited. In fact, the story of Esther, recited on Purim, has been turned into plays, skits, puppet shows, and musicals.[2] It, as will be discussed, can be recited in the ancient tradition of storytelling.

2. Storytelling and Translating

2.1. Storytelling

Storytelling is an ancient art, so much so that "in the ancient world, the storyteller was a visible figure" (Copley 2007:288), a major part of the community. Storytellers use a basic story pattern needed to create good oration, which involves an introduction to the characters, a description of the problem, events that solve the problem, and then the final resolution of the problem. It is the job of the storyteller to present the story in an interactive manner (Livo and Rietz 1986), because they are keepers of the narrative (Copley 2007). In a sense, they return to the people their own literature (Livo and Rietz 1986). What storytellers do not realize is that they are editors, because as they tell the story they judge what the audience needs and is interested in, which results in some details being added, ignored, or changed (Copley 2007).

2.2. Translating

Translators are storytellers as well. A good translator "tries through the letter to reach the spirit" (Friar 1971:197), which allows the translator to reorganize words or sentences to make the meaning clearer (De Troyer 2001). Kristen De Troyer notes that translators have three goals: translation, interpretation, and actualization. The first goal is to "make the text available in another language," the next is to make it

[1] This paper would not be without the encouragement of Dr. Leonard Greenspoon, Klutznick Chair in Jewish Civilization and professor of Classical and Near Eastern Studies and of Theology at Creighton University and adjunct faculty at the Spertus Institute of Jewish Leadership and Learning.

[2] My favorite version so far is the one my rabbi did setting the story of Esther to 1970s pop tunes. The opening song was the theme song to the Brady Bunch beginning: "Here's the story of a girl named Esther…."

"understandable in another language," and the last is to make it "functional" (De Troyer 2001:344). Allen Turner likens a translator to a musical arranger "who rewrites a piece for a different instrument or group of instruments" (2006:168). Kimon Friar, a poet and translator, notes that

> Translation not only reshapes the body of a work, striving to attain to a reasonable and recognizable likeness. It does much more. It infuses new life into this body by injecting into it the warm, living blood of its own time, place, and language. It brings it back into life, gives the phantom shape in such a way that it becomes meaningful again for our own time and place, and continues to contribute to the ever-shifting multiformity of life and its evolution. (1971:199)

Translators preserves a history by bringing to life a story from another period or culture and making it a living story through their understanding of language, much as a storyteller does. The purpose of a good translation "is to transmit the message of the original" (Braun 1975:786). Thus, a good translator keeps the original message of the text while transposing it into a different language. Theophile J. Meek (1962) is quite clear that translating the Bible, especially the Old Testament, has its own set of difficulties. He encourages maintaining as many of the original language constructs as possible without making the translation impossible to follow.

3. Bible as Story

One of the greatest stories is the Hebrew Bible. Terence Copley (2007:289) presents a typical order of the creation of the Bible as oral presentation, writing, editing, and finally translation. All of these phases can result in deletions or omissions, purposeful or not, in the story. "But at every phase in this process, from the first oral telling perhaps to the animation of the narrative for the cinema several millennia later, there is a storyteller" (Copley 2007:291). Storytelling is important in the process. Oral transmission is most important in illiterate societies, which is what ancient Israel really was. However, part of the transmission, part of what holds Jews together in the Diaspora, is the oral transmission of the history, the sacred text. Copley also suggests that further editing is done "by the teacher or preacher, whose use of pause, inflection, and emphasis provides the latest 'edition' of the story" (2007:291).

3.1. Book of Esther

Many scholars believe the Book of Esther, the part of the Hebrew Bible under discussion here, was originally part of an oral tradition or traditions from the early Persian Period (about late 5th Century B.C.E.) (Friedberg 2000; Momigliano 1975) and is possibly a remake of a Persian story (Berlin 2001a; Momigliano 1975). Other scholars believe the Book of Esther to be a historiography, as can be seen through the author's strong presence in the story, more so than in most other biblical work (Berlin 2001a). Some even believe that rather than stories, this book began as skits or plays (2001a). Additionally, there are some scholars who have outlined how the Book of Esther mirrors Oriental tales (Greenstein 1990). Berlin (2001b) believes it to be a true religious story since the Book of Esther outlines its own reason for Purim's existence and identifies it as the most humorous of all biblical books.

How does this story of Esther follow the story-telling pattern? The first part of a story is the introduction of the characters. First the king is introduced, then his eunuchs, his queen, and so forth. The problem is set up with the queen's refusal to present herself to the king, followed by the grand vizier's desire to eradicate the Jews of the nation. This follows what Norma Livo and Sandra Rietz (1986) consider to be the normal structure of an oral story. The events taken to solve the problem are next. In the Book of Esther, this is the presentation of Esther as a royal wife who must save her people from annhilation. The resolution takes place when Esther turns the vizier's words around to his own detriment. This completes the story formula. Jews have kept the true nature of the original story and the art of storytelling, whatever it may be, by rewriting it as skits and plays. Translators or interpreters keep the meaning of the story by re-crafting it either in a new language or a new format.

3.2. Reciting the Book of Esther

The tradition of reciting the Book of Esther dates to the *Mishnah*[3] which says:

[3] The *Mishnah* is the oldest portion of the Talmud, an explanation of the laws in the Hebrew Bible.

> Anyone who reads the Megilla[4] in an irregular manner does not fulfil [sic] his duty; nor if he reads it by heart, or translated in any language which he does not understand. It is lawful, however, to read to those that know no Hebrew in a foreign language which they understand; if they have heard it in (the original language with) Assyrian characters, they have also done their duty (though they have not understood the Hebrew). (Rodkinson 1918)

The *Mishnah* quite explicitly states that "'remember' must mean orally" (Rodkinson 1918). Additionally, it is customary and legal to translate the book into a language that the community will understand, according to the rabbis. Therefore, reading the story of Esther is acceptable to study this book; however, the story is to be recited so that it can be remembered. In fact, the rabbis discussed what portions of the book must be recited so that the requirement to recite the story has been fulfilled (Berlin 2001b). "If we assume the practice of storytelling in ancient Israel" (Campbell 2002:429), then the "Diaspora stories [are] to provide Jewish continuity in the face of overwhelming dislocation of the Jewish community" (Berlin 2001a:7). That is the purpose of reading the Torah and of having a structured service.

There is more involved in reciting the Book of Esther than standing on a podium and chanting some lines in Hebrew, as is done with the Torah. It is, as Richard Bauman describes, a "cultural performance" where it takes a place of importance within the community. While it doesn't follow all of his stages, being that it is not formalized or always presented by the most accomplished actors, it is scheduled (even annually repeated on a specific date) and publically presented. Custom has added an audience-response characteristic—the audience drowns out the sound of the name of the villain, Haman. Interestingly, this custom comes from a belief that Amalek is the forefather of Haman. On the Shabbat before Purim, the festival of Esther, Deuteronomy 25:17–19 is read as a special *maftir*.[5] This *parsha*[6] discusses what one should do about Amalek after his destruction of the Jews:

> *[17] Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt— [18] how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear. [19] Therefore, when the Lord your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!*

From these verses came the custom of overpowering Haman's name as a way of overpowering Amalek—the congregation will pound their feet, spin *grogers* (noisemakers), clap hands, hoot, or make noise in any other way. One of the things Keith Park (2004) suggests as crucial to a storyteller is the idea of turn-taking; not only does the storyteller tell a story, but the audience interacts with the storyteller. This interaction between storyteller(s) and participants is a crucial part of the Purim experience.

The other custom is to dress in costume for the day. There are two sets of interpretation behind this tradition. One is that it is an ancient Persian custom related to the original Persian story and the other is that it is symbolic of Esther's situation. Since Esther hid her identity in the king's palace, Jews hide their true selves for the day. Edward Greenstein (1987) considers the story of Esther a skit, not a drama nor a story to be read.

4. Translations of the Book of Esther

There are far too many English translations of the Book of Esther to address them all in this short paper. Therefore, I have chosen three to be studied. The most popular of these is the King James Bible, chosen because it is still in common use 400 years after it was published. The Jewish Publication Society version is the most recent Jewish version, and since the Old Testament was originally a Jewish text and Jews are most concerned with the oral nature of this story, it is an important version to include. Edward Greenstein took another approach to the translation; he wanted to make the story seem like it is a foreign tale. Because of this unusual approach to the Esther story, Greenstein's version could be considered something of an interesting outlier to this study. The most important issue, regardless of the version, is whether or not the translation succeeds at its purpose.

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[4] *Megilah* is the Hebrew term that refers to the Book of Esther.
[5] A *maftir* is the final *parsha* of the weekly reading.
[6] A *parsha* is a section of the Torah assigned to be read on a particular week.

4.1. Greenstein's Translation

Greenstein explains that his translation "accentuates the syntax of the original Hebrew, the structural and verbal repetitions in the source" (1990:55). His point was to make his "translation to sound as though one were listening to the music of a foreign but recognizable civilization" (1990:56). Meek would applaud this decision because he supports the idea of maintaining "the flavor of the original and it distorts setting…. A translation should faithfully reflect the milieu of the original and transport the reader back into the past" (1962:148). This is an interesting choice because the story, presumed to be Persian, is for the Diasporic Jews to provide a feeling of power, of control over their lives. The lilt of foreignness is quite obvious in Greenstein's translation. Here are verses 10–12 of the first chapter:

> *On the seventh day, when the king's heart was good from wine, he said to Mehuman, Bizzetha, Harvona, Biggetha, and Avagtha, Zeitar, and Carcas, the seven eunuchs attending before the king Ahashveriosh, to have Vashti the king's wife come before the king in the kingly turban, to have the people and the lords look at her beauty, for good to look at was she. She refused, the king's-wife Vashti, to come at the king's word that was [sent] by the hand of the eunuchs. He fumed very much, the king did, and the wrath burned inside him.*

From these few lines we can feel the Hebrew and understand the ancient art of storytelling; it is "an oral experience" (Greenstein 1990:56). The language is clearly understandable, but not what one would consider standard written English, or even any American colloquialism. We would never say, "the kingly turban." Without a doubt it is clear that the author is explaining a royal headdress; however, we would say, "his turban" or "the royal turban." On top of this, the word used in the Book of Esther is רתב, which means "crown," not turban. So why this translation? Clearly Greenstein is trying to recreate, or create, a Persian feel for his version of the story. Additionally, there is the use of the word "eunuch" (סרס), which is an accurate translation of the word. While we don't have eunuchs in the US, most educated persons would understand what that term means and would definitely associate it with the Middle and Far East. What Greenstein has done here is show the grammatical structure of the "foreign" language.

4.2. King James Translation

The King James Version of the Bible (KJV) was translated 400 years ago with the intent of expanding Christianity and unifying the religion, as it is explained in the preface (1611) "to goe forward with the confidence and resolution of a man in maintaining the trueth of CHRIST, and propagating it farre and neere." The translators published in the preface to the KJV that "but amongst all our Joyes, there was no one that more filled our hearts, then the blessed continuance of the Preaching of GODS sacred word amongst us." Since preaching is the act of reciting the various verses with explanation within a sermon, this tells us that the KJV was written to be recited, if not in order, at least in verses. According to Gordon Campbell, the editor of the 400th anniversary edition of the KJV, "It was the Bible translated with the express purpose of being read aloud. So it was read aloud in churches, cathedrals, and indeed in private households…. It is this that accounts for the rhythms." In fact, the final edit was an auditory one; the editors heard the Bible, not read it, according to John Selden (in Newcome 1792:114). As Nicolson (2011:45) puts it, "they wanted the Bible to sound right." Verses 10–12 in the KJV, while it has the same meaning, clearly use very different language.

> *[10] On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, and Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven chamberlains that served in the presence of Ahasuerus the king,*
>
> *[11] To bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal, to shew the people and the princes her beauty: for she was fair to look on.*
>
> *[12] But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king's commandment by his chamberlains: therefore was the king very wroth, and his anger burned in him.*

Forgetting the nature of some of the language that is archaic now (400 years after this translation was published) and was somewhat archaic even when the text was published—words like "shew" and "wroth"—there are other changes in the structure. Rather than "the kingly turban," the translators wrote "the crown royal." This is an appropriate translation of the word רתב, and a term to which their readers could relate. The word "chamberlain," while not an accurate translation of the word סרס, is clearly an attempt to bring this

story to its audience. After all, the intent of King James with the publication of his Bible was to recognize that the "language is very much improved in politeness and correctness since that version [the one produced under Queen Elizabeth] was made," according to Matthew Pilkington, chaplain to the Lord Mayor of London at the time (cited in Newcome 1792:127). The translators admit in the preface to the KJV that "wee have not tyed our selves to an uniformitie of phrasing, or to an identitie of words, as some peradventure would wish that we had done, because they observe, that some learned men some where, have beene as exact." However, if the purpose is to make this a preaching Bible, one from which a vicar or rector would recite, then the change in the language is important because that would make the text more relatable to the general public of the period. No uneducated person of the period would understand what a eunuch was; there were not any in British castles. However, a chamberlain would be a very accessible concept.

4.3. Jewish Publication Society Translation

The Jewish Publication Society (JPS) version has a different purpose; it "is a study Bible" (xiii). There is no intention of this text, unlike the other two, being read aloud. Therefore, we are going to experience a more precise but less poetic translation. Verses 10–12 read as follows:

> *On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he ordered Mehuman, Bizzetha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven eunuchs in attendance on King Ahasuerus, to bring Queen Vashti before the king wearing a royal diadem, to display her beauty to the peoples and the officials; for she was a beautiful woman. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command conveyed by the eunuchs. The king was greatly incensed, and his fury burned within him.*

Here is clearly a version that is written in modern standard English. Its grammar has no foreign lilt like Greenstein's, nor is it archaic like KJV. The language is what we use today, which makes it very approachable. However, instead of the most accurate "crown" for רתב, these translators use "diadem," which is actually נזר.

4.4. Language

According to Berlin, the term *keter* is only found in the Book of Esther and "refers to a headband worn widely in the Persian Empire" (2001a:12). Thus Greenstein's translation of this as "turban" does put us in the right foreign understanding of headgear, even if it is not really a turban. The KJV use of "crown" does not really do justice to the term either. Apparently, the translators wanted a 1600s vision of a king to be in the listeners' heads. However, the closest is the JPS "diadem," which offers the reader a vision of a light circlet. We can see by examining the choice of language how the story is adapted and affects the listener and their relationship with it.

Note the ambiguity of the language in these three translations:

> *"Vashti the king's-wife come before the king in the kingly turban"*
>
> *"Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal"*
>
> *"Queen Vashti before the king wearing a royal diadem"*

Who is wearing the crown: Vashti or Ahasuerus? Technically, the way these three translations are written, it is the king. The KJV even calls it the "kingly turban." Wouldn't a queen wear a "queenly turban"? If Vashti is the wearer, then a more precise sentence would read, "Queen Vashti wearing a royal diadem before the king." The Hebrew reads,

> אֶת-וַשְׁתִּי הַמַּלְכָּה, לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ--בְּכֶתֶר מַלְכוּת

which can be crudely and inelegantly translated as:

> *Vashti the Queen, to the face/presence of the king in the diadem of royalty*

Again, here is ambiguity. It is interesting to note that Mordecai Housman's translation (2004) is not ambiguous: "to bring Queen Vashti, wearing only her royal crown, before the king." However, Housman explains, "I have not translated literally, but rather conceptually. Instead of a translation, I have rendered the meaning of the verses, in clear and modern English." I'm not sure how he made such a judgment that Vashti

is wearing the royal diadem, except that it makes sense conceptually. She would be naked, but for the diadem that would show her to be different from all other women.

The description of Vashti as "beautiful" in the JPS translation is accurate, as the Hebrew reads תא-היפי, "her beauty" or "the beauty that is hers," but does nothing to help the reader understand her beauty. On the other hand, the KJV explains that she "was fair to look upon." This language is stilted, but certainly more elegant. Greenstein, while describing the same experience as the KJV, again presents this in a stilted or foreign manner: "for good to look at was she." Here again, we see the difference between the most accurate translation and the most elegant or musical translation.

Another interesting phrase is how the translators/editors describe the king and his drinking. The Hebrew reads:

כְּטוֹב לֵב-הַמֶּלֶךְ, בַּיָּיִן

A literal, inelegant translation here is:

Good heart the king with the wine.

Greenstein likes "good from wine," while the other two prefer "merry with wine." Both are very descriptive, and Greenstein is clearly closer to a literal translation; however, they are not something to which we relate. We might say, "happy from the wine" or "tipsy." Greenstein's is clearly meant to sound foreign. The JPS version is notorious for not changing the KJV language. The 1917 JPS preface states that one of the versions used for its translation was "the divergent renderings from the Revised Version prepared for the Jews of England" (vii–viii), which was in fact the KJV. Thus it seems the latest JPS version still relies upon the KJV.

5. Conclusion

What then have we learned from this quick overview of only three translations of the Book of Esther? First we learned that the translators and editors kept their word as to what they planned on presenting in their versions. Greenstein definitely has a foreign lilt to his text. One can see the difference in grammatical structure and culture through Greenstein's writing. This is a text that is neither light nor uncomplicated—one that is meant to be spoken because of the music of the language. The KJV's language is one that is formal and impressive. It is designed to inspire the audience and make the story relatable to their world. The JPS version, the study text, is precise language that does not inspire interaction with the listener. That is not its purpose, however, so there should be no disappointment. Since the intention of the JPS translators/editors was to provide a study tool, an accurate translation is what is required.

We do need to return to our original question of whether translators are also storytellers. If we examine Greenstein and the KJV we can see that they are. These two versions that were created to inspire a listener do just that. The one who recites, orates, or preaches expects an interaction with the audience, at least on a minimal level. For Jews, the interaction that Greenstein strives for is just what one is supposed to accomplish on Purim, the holiday on which the Book of Esther is read. He wants the audience to be transported to another place and be inspired to interact with the storyteller(s). Christians do not see the Book of Esther as a play or skit or comedy; rather, they consider it one of the important books of the Bible, and the formal nature of the King James Version is exactly what the minister needs to preach to his congregation. Thus we can conclude that translators should consider themselves storytellers.

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