

5.20 EVERETT FOX

Everett Fox, educated at Brandeis University, is the Allen M. Glick Professor of Judaic and Biblical Studies at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. He has investigated the rhetoric and internal coherence of the Hebrew Bible, with the object of conveying these qualities, as far as possible, in his translations. These have appeared in *The Five Books of Moses* (1995), and in *Give Us a King!: Samuel, Saul, and David* (1999). Fox has relied substantially on the theory and practice of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig. Together with Lawrence Rosenwald, he has also translated Buber and Rosenzweig's *Scripture and Translation* (1994; see Sect. 4.5, above, on Buber and Rosenzweig).

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From Everett Fox's 'Translator's Preface' to *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995)

... read the Bible as though it were something entirely unfamiliar, as though it had not been set before you ready-made. ... Face the book with a new attitude as something new. ... Let whatever may happen occur between yourself and it. You do not know which of its sayings and images will overwhelm and mold you. ... But hold yourself open. Do not believe anything a priori; do not disbelieve anything a priori. Read aloud the words written in the book in front of you; hear the word you utter and let it reach you.

—adapted from a lecture of Martin Buber, 1926

The purpose of this work is to draw the reader into the world of the Hebrew Bible through the power of its language. While this sounds simple enough, it is not usually possible in translation. Indeed, the premise of almost all Bible translations, past and present, is that the 'meaning' of the text should be conveyed in as clear and comfortable a manner as possible in one's own language. Yet the truth is that the Bible was not written in English in the twentieth or even the seventeenth century; it is ancient, sometimes obscure, and speaks in a way quite different from ours. Accordingly, I have sought here primarily to echo the style of the original, believing that the Bible is best approached, at least at the beginning, on its own terms. So I have presented the text in English dress but with a Hebraic voice.

The result looks and sounds very different from what we are accustomed to encountering as the Bible, whether in the much-loved grandeur of the King James Version or the clarity and easy fluency of the many recent attempts. There are no old friends here; Eve will not, as in old paintings, give Adam an apple (nor will she be called 'Eve'), nor will

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Moses speak of himself as ‘a stranger in a strange land,’ as beautiful as that sounds. Instead, the reader will encounter a text which challenges him or her to rethink what these ancient books are and what they mean, and will hopefully be encouraged to become an active listener rather than a passive receiver.

This translation is guided by the principle that the Hebrew Bible, like much of the literature of antiquity, was meant to be read aloud, and that consequently it must be translated with careful attention to rhythm and sound. The translation therefore tries to mimic the particular rhetoric of the Hebrew whenever possible, preserving such devices as repetition, allusion, alliteration, and wordplay. It is intended to echo the Hebrew, and to lead the reader back to the sound structure and form of the original.

Such an approach was first espoused by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig in their monumental German translation of the Bible (1925–1962) and in subsequent interpretive essays. *The Five Books of Moses* is in many respects an offshoot of the Buber-Rosenzweig translation (hereafter abbreviated as B-R). I began with their principles: that translations of individual words should reflect ‘primal’ root meanings, that translations of phrases, lines, and whole verses should mimic the syntax of the Hebrew, and that the vast web of allusions and wordplays present in the text should be somehow perceivable in the target language (for a full exposition in English, see now Buber and Rosenzweig 1994). In all these areas I have taken a more moderate view than my German mentors, partly because I think there are limitations to these principles and partly because recent scholarship points in broader directions. As a result, my translation is on the whole less radical and less strange in English than B-R was in German. This, however, does not mean that it is less different from conventional translations, or that I have abandoned the good fight for a fresh look at the Bible’s verbal power.

Buber and Rosenzweig based their approach on the Romantic nineteenth-century notion that the Bible was essentially oral literature written down. In the present century there have been Bible scholars who have found this view attractive; on the other hand, there has been little agreement on how oral roots manifest themselves in the text. One cannot suggest that the Bible is a classic work of oral literature in the same sense as the *Iliad* or *Beowulf*. It does not employ regular meter or rhyme, even in sections that are clearly formal poetry. The text of the Bible that we possess is most likely a mixture of oral and written materials from a variety of periods and sources, and recovering anything resembling original oral forms would seem to be impossible. This is particularly true given the considerable chronological and cultural distance at which we stand from the text, which does not permit us to know how it was performed in ancient times.

A more fruitful approach, less dependent upon theories whose historical accuracy is unprovable, might be to focus on the way in which the biblical text, *once completed*, was

copied and read. Recent research reveals that virtually all literature in Greek and Roman times—the period when the Hebrew Bible was put into more or less the form in which it has come down to us (but not the period of its composition)—was read aloud. This holds for the process of copying or writing, and also, surprisingly, for solitary reading. As late as the last decade of the fourth century, Saint Augustine expressed surprise at finding a sage who read silently. Such practices and attitudes seem strange to us, for whom the very definition of a library, for instance, is a place where people have to keep quiet. But it was a routine in the world of antiquity, as many sources attest.

So the Bible, if not an oral document, is certainly an aural one; it would have been read aloud as a matter of course. But the implications of this for understanding the text are considerable. The rhetoric of the text is such that many passages and sections are understandable in depth only when they are analyzed *as they are heard*. Using echoes, allusions, and powerful inner structures of sound, the text is often able to convey ideas in a manner that vocabulary alone cannot do. A few illustrations may suffice to introduce this phenomenon to the reader; it will be encountered constantly throughout this volume.

Sound plays a crucial role in one of the climactic sequences in Genesis, Chapters 32–33. Jacob, the protagonist, has not seen his brother Esau for twenty years. Now a rich and successful adult, he is on his way back to Canaan after a long exile. He sends messengers to forestall Esau's vengeance—for twenty years earlier, Jacob had stolen the birthright and the blessing which Esau felt were rightly his own. When Jacob finds out that his brother 'is already coming . . . and four hundred men are with him' (32: 7), he goes even further, preparing an elaborate gift for Esau in the hopes of appeasing his anger. The text in vv.21–22 presents Jacob's thoughts and actions (the translation is taken from the New English Bible):

for he thought, 'I will appease him with the present that I have sent on ahead, and afterwards, when I come into his presence, he will perhaps receive me kindly.' So Jacob's present went on ahead of him. . . .

This is an accurate and highly idiomatic translation of the Hebrew, and the reader will notice nothing unusual about the passage as it reads in English. The sound of the Hebrew text, on the other hand, gives one pause. It is built on variations of the word *panim*, whose basic meaning is 'face,' although the Hebrew uses it idiomatically to encompass various ideas. (Note: in Hebrew, the sound *p* is pronounced as *ph* under certain circumstances.) If the text is translated with attention to sound, its quite striking oral character emerges (*italics mine*):

For he said to himself:
I will wipe (the anger from) his *face* (*phanav*)
with the gift that goes ahead of my *face*; (*le-phanai*)

afterward, when I see his *face*, (*phanav*)
 perhaps he will lift up my *face!* (*phanai*)
 The gift crossed over ahead of his *face*. . . . (*al panav*)

Comparison of these two English versions is instructive. In the New English Bible, as in most other contemporary versions, the translators are apparently concerned with presenting the text in clear, modern, idiomatic English. For example, they render the Hebrew *yissa phanai* as 'receive me kindly.' The N.E.B. translates the *idea* of the text; at the same time it translates *out* the sound by not picking up on the repetition of *panim* words.

What does the reader gain by hearing the literalness of the Hebrew? And what is lost by the use of its idiomatic meaning? As mirrored in the second translation, it is clear that our text is signaling something of significance. The motif of 'face' (which might be interpreted as 'facing' or 'confrontation') occurs at crucial points in the story. The night before his fateful meeting with Esau, as he is left to ponder the next day's events, Jacob wrestles with a mysterious stranger—a divine being. After Jacob's victory, the text reports (32: 31):

Yaakov called the name of the place: Peniel/*Face of God*,
 for: I have seen God,
face to face,
 and my life has been saved.

The repetition suggests a thematic link with what has gone before. One could interpret that once the hero has met and actually bested this divine being, his coming human confrontation is assured of success. Thus upon meeting Esau at last, Jacob says to him (33: 10):

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For I have, after all, seen your *face*, as one sees the *face* of God,
 and you have been gracious to me.

It could be said that in a psychological sense the meetings with divine and human adversaries are a unity, the representation of one human process in two narrative episodes. This is accomplished by the repetition of the word *panim* in the text.

The above interpretation depends entirely on sound. Once that focus is dropped, either through the silent reading of the text or a standard translation, the inner connections are simply lost and the reader is robbed of the opportunity to make these connections for himself. Clearly there is a difference between translating what the text means and translating what it says.

While the Jacob passages use the sound of a specific word to indicate an important motif in the narrative, there are other cases where sound brings out structure, and the

structure itself conveys the principal idea of the passage. A striking example of this is found at the beginning of Genesis. God's first acts of creation in 1: 3–5 are portrayed in a highly ordered fashion, suggesting that creation itself is orderly, and this idea is the thematic backbone of the whole chapter. We are meant to experience the orderliness of God's activity through the sensuality of the language and through the particular way in which the text speaks. A translation keyed to the sound of the Hebrew reads:

God said: Let there be light! And there was light.
 God saw the light: that it was good.
 God separated the light from the darkness.
 God called the light: Day! and the darkness he called: Night!

The four occurrences of 'God' plus verb accomplish the narrator's goal, and give a tone to the creation account that makes it akin to poetry. In contrast, virtually all modern translations treat the passage as prose, rendering it into clear written English but simultaneously removing its inner structure. What remains is a statement of what is taking place in the narrative, but without its underlying thrust. Again the New English Bible:

God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light; and God saw that the light was good, and he separated light from darkness. He called the light day, and the darkness night.

This translation is cast in good English style. For just that reason two occurrences of 'God' have been omitted, and the passage consequently reads smoothly—so smoothly that one glides past it as if creation were the same as any other narrated action. But what has been lost is the characteristic oral ring of the text, and simultaneously its intent to say something beyond the content of words alone.

Another example of translating with an ear to the sound and structure of the original, this time from the book of Exodus, comes from the dramatic story of the Sea of Reeds (14: 11–12). The newly freed Israelites find themselves pursued by their former masters, the Pharaoh and his army; with their backs to the Sea, they panic, and bitterly harangue their would-be deliverer, Moses. The present translation, attempting to reflect the repetition and structure of the original, yields the following:

they said to Moshe:
 Is it because there are no graves in Egypt
 that you have taken us out to die in the wilderness?
 What is this that you have done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?
 Is this not the very word that we spoke to you in Egypt,
 saying: Let us alone, that we may serve Egypt!

Indeed, better for us serving Egypt
than our dying in the wilderness!

This passage demonstrates several aspects of a rhetorical translation method, if we may so term it: the laying out of the text in ‘cola’ or lines meant to facilitate reading aloud (more on this below); the repetition of words—‘Egypt’ five times and ‘wilderness’ twice—to stress the irony of the Israelites’ predicament (as they see it, Egypt means life, and the wilderness, certain death); and the double use of ‘serve,’ the very word that Moses constantly drummed into Pharaoh’s ears in the early part of the book to denote the Israelites’ desire to go and worship their God (‘Send free my people, that they may serve me’). If we juxtapose the above translation with that found in, say, the New International Version, the importance of this approach to the text becomes clear:

They said to Moses, ‘Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, “Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians”? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!’

Here the rhetorical force of the Hebrew has been ignored. The Hebrew text does not transpose ‘desert to die’ to ‘die in the desert’ at the end of the passage (the word order repeats in the original, for emphasis); it does not distinguish in sound between ‘Egypt’ and ‘Egyptians’; and it certainly does not read like standard colloquial prose. Indeed, all of Chapter 14 of Exodus demonstrates the Bible’s use of an intermediate form between poetry and prose, a form designed to instruct as well as to inspire.

But it is not only in narrative that the rhetoric of biblical language makes itself felt. Fully half of the book of Exodus is law or instruction, and one can find there further examples of the importance of sound structure in the Bible. Take, for instance, the law concerning the protection of widows and orphans (22: 23–24). This time I shall present the text first through the eyes of the Jerusalem Bible:

You must not be harsh with the widow, or with the orphan; if you are harsh with them, they will surely cry out to me, and be sure that I shall hear their cry; my anger will flare and I shall kill you with the sword, your own wives will be widows, your own children orphans.

This is powerful language, especially in a law code. But the Hebrew text goes much farther, utilizing as it does a double form of the verb rarely found in multiple sequence:

Any widow or orphan you are not to afflict.
Oh, if you afflict, afflict them . . . !
For (then) they will cry, cry out to me,
and I will hearken, hearken to their cry,

my anger will flare up
and I will kill you with the sword,
so that your wives become widows, and your children,
orphans!

Here the text is in effect slowed down by the division into lines, and the verb forms are isolated to underscore their unique rhetoric. The effect of the whole is to focus attention on this particular law among a host of others. (pp. ix–xv)

Genesis II: 1–9, as translated in Fox, *Five Books of Moses*, pp. 48–9.

[Cf. other versions of the same passage, pp. 9–10, 13–14, 43–6, 66–7, 72, 113–14, 119–20, 321–2, 351, and 568.]

1. Now all the earth was of one language and one set-of-words.
- 2 And it was when they migrated to the east that they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there.
- 3 They said, each man to his neighbour:
Come-now! Let us bake bricks and let us burn them well-burnt!
So for them brick-stone was like building-stone, and raw-bitumen was for them like red-mortar.
- 4 Now they said:
Come-now! Let us build ourselves a city and a tower, its top in the heavens,
and let us make ourselves a name,
lest we be scattered over the face of all the earth!
- 5 But YHWH came down to look over the city and the tower that the humans were building.
- 6 YHWH said:
Here (they are) one people with one language for them all,
and this is merely the first of their doings—
now there will be no barrier for them in all that they scheme to do!
- 7 Come-now! Let us go down and there let us baffle their language,
so that no man will understand the language of his neighbour.
- 8 So YHWH scattered them from there over the face of all the earth,
and they had to stop building the city.
- 9 Therefore its name was called Bavel/Babble,
for there YHWH baffled the language of all the earth-folk,
and from there, YHWH scattered them over the face of all the earth.