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Review of Joel M. Hoffman, *And God Said: How Translations Conceal the Bible's Original Meaning*

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Abstract

A little learning, they say, is a dangerous thing. Joel Hoffman's background would seem to have left him with more than just a little learning, but a reading of his book *And God Said* demonstrates that he still falls well within the danger area. It's too bad, because his topic is one that deserves a good book for a general readership; and Hoffman himself has a few worthwhile things to say.

Disciplines

Biblical Studies | Jewish Studies

On the basis of his translation of the wisdom books, along with the prior volumes, one might with justification eagerly anticipate a complete Alter literary and linguistic study edition of the Hebrew Bible.

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And God Said: How Translations Conceal the Bible's Original Meaning, by Joel M. Hoffman. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010. 256 pp. \$25.99.

A little learning, they say, is a dangerous thing. Joel Hoffman's background would seem to have left him with more than just a little learning, but a reading of his book *And God Said* demonstrates that he still falls well within the danger area. It's too bad, because his topic is one that deserves a good book for a general readership; and Hoffman himself has a few worthwhile things to say.

The book is divided into two sections, each comprising about half the book. The first, "Getting Started," consists of three chapters explaining why all previous translations of the Bible are "wrong," and demonstrating the "correct" approach to Bible translation. The second, "Moving Forward," applies Hoffman's method to five biblical phrases or passages: *b'chol levavcha u-v'chol nafshecha* (Deut 6:5); *YHWH ro'i* (Ps 23:1); *aboti kallah* (Song of Songs, *passim*); *lo tirtzach* and *lo tahmod* (in the Ten Commandments of Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5); and *almah* (Isa 7:14).

Part I of the book, "Getting Started," is intended to prove the inadequacy of all translation methods other than Hoffman's (which he does by demonstrating that pushed to extremes they all lead to absurdity) and to demonstrate his own approach. This is the method of "functional equivalence" (p. 238)—though the reader will not learn this phrase without reading the "Guide to Translations and Further Reading" that appears in a significantly smaller type size as an appendix at the back of the book. In the main text, explanation is more or less limited to one sentence saying that "the goal is to understand not just the vocabulary but also the grammar of the source language ... and then try to do the same thing in the target language" (p. 69) and a diagram, labeled "Table I" (it is the only graphic feature in the book), showing translation as a process of "decoding" the "function" of the phrase in the source language and encoding the same "function" in the target language (p. 69).

This technique, too, could be shown to lead to absurd results if carried to extremes. The amazing thing about the book is that Hoffman himself provides the absurdities of his own method. Take, for example, "the Lord is my shepherd" from Psalm 23. Hoffman explains what is wrong with this translation:

“The problem is that shepherds, once common, are now rare” (p. 126). Nowadays, a shepherd is “meek, humble, powerless, and . . . not a part of mainstream society” (p. 133), whereas in biblical times shepherds provided sustenance and were powerful, romantic, and common—none of which apply to shepherds today. So Hoffman tries out various other options: marine, fireman, lawyer, lumberjack, cowboy, pilot, doctor, nurse, veterinarian, zookeeper, farmer. He concludes, “None of these options is right, but every one is better than ‘shepherd,’ which, as we have seen, is completely wrong” (p. 135).

Can one really say that “the Lord is my lumberjack” is a better translation for *YHWH ro'i* than “the Lord is my shepherd” and expect to be taken seriously? And this exemplifies the book. Some of Hoffman’s points in Part II of the book are valid and worth making, e.g., that *ahoti* in the Song of Songs means that the lover is referring to her as his equal. Yet he frames them over and over solely as a problem of translation. And translation is something that he turns out not to be very good at: “We want something not quite as chatty as ‘I will lack nothing’ but not so formal as ‘I will not lack.’ We arbitrarily pick ‘I will not lack,’ giving us: ‘The Lord is my hero and I will not lack.’ (Let’s be clear, though. This isn’t a very good translation. It’s just the best we have.)” (p. 145). Discussing Num 23:21 he writes, “Our translation here ignores some details” (p. 140).

Far worse than this is the fact that the book is sloppily written and jam-packed with errors and irrelevancies. Just a tiny sampling is possible here. Hoffman thinks relating “atonement” to “at-one-ment” is “a neat wordplay” (p. 28); it is the actual derivation of the word. His book was published on Feb. 2, 2010, “almost seventy years to the day from the rule of Queen Elizabeth II of Britain” (p. 137); she became queen in 1952. V-Y-K-L appears “in the Dead Sea Scrolls” at Deut 31:1 “where the Hebrew Bible has V-Y-L-K . . . what scholars call haplography (‘wrong writing’) and what everyone else calls a typo” (p. 213); this is metathesis, not haplography, which means “single writing” and refers to “the unintentional writing of a letter or word, or series of letters or words, once, when it should be written twice” (OED). The word *chayil* means “soldier” in Modern Hebrew (p. 139); that would be *chayyal*. Everett Fox’s translation is limited to the Five Books of Moses (p. 233); Fox published a translation of Samuel in 1999. Even Shoshan is “an Israeli publishing company” that has put out a biblical concordance (p. 239); Abraham Even-Shoshan is the author of the concordance. Part of the “riveting” story of the Dead Sea Scrolls: “an archaeologist who just happened to be in charge of the Israeli army in 1967” (p. 241); that would be Yitzhak Rabin, not Yigael Yadin.

In short, the writing in this book veers from the arrogant to the absurd, and much of what it has to say is misleading or just plain mistaken. As a writer

and teacher whose life work is to introduce the Bible to a broad public, I can only hope that none of them will read this book.

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The Invention of Hebrew, by Seth L. Sanders. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009. 258 pp. \$50.00.

The very title of Seth L. Sanders's audacious book is already a bit startling, inasmuch as natural languages—as opposed to, say, Esperanto and Fortran—cannot be said to be “inventions.” What Sanders actually has in mind is the invention of vernacular literature, specifically, ancient Israel's creation of a standard written Hebrew that could serve as its language of culture and administration. In the Late Bronze Age, writing in one or another imperial dialect (using cuneiform, naturally) was *de rigueur* among scribal circles of the Ancient Near East. Why, then, did Israelite writers suddenly adopt the alphabet and turn to their native Hebrew in the ninth century B.C.E.? What in particular is the social significance of this linguistic displacement? To answer such questions, this prodigiously researched and wide-ranging study focuses not so much on the Bible as on the epigraphical data. The result is a thought-provoking social history of writing, combining philology, anthropology, and political theory. Sanders's overarching claim is that the rise of written vernacular forms in the Iron Age Levant—ultimately, the Bible itself—signals a new mode of political communication, one that introduced a new actor into history, namely, the people.

The book consists of four central chapters framed by a brief introduction and conclusion. In Chapter One, Sanders traces in broad strokes the development of modern biblical studies in relation to general intellectual history, in an attempt to explain why the field has “lost sight of . . . the socially creative dimension of how a text speaks, not just what it says” (p. 14). He places particular emphasis on two pairs of intellectual figures: Hobbes and Spinoza, Lowth and Herder. Invoking the first pair establishes a first major premise: that the Bible is a specimen of “political communication.” Invoking the second establishes a second major premise: that this political communication must be related to a people and a place. Chapter Two begins by surveying the early history of the alphabet and its first tentative uses, but the main goal here is to explore the significance of the first two known instances of vernacular literature, that of Ugarit and, later, Israel. It culminates in a fascinating comparison of the Ugaritic “ritual for national atonement and unity” (p. 59) and the biblical Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). In both, one witnesses the appearance