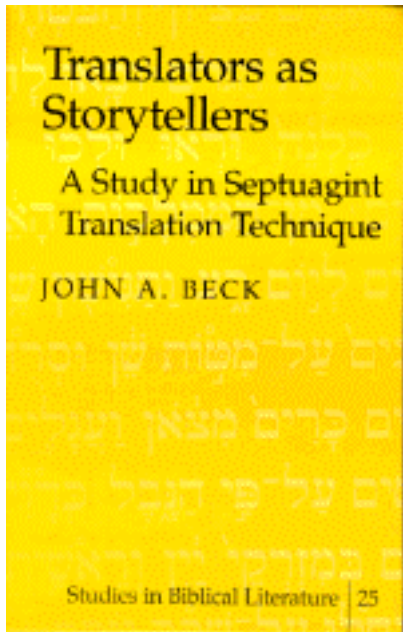


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Translators As Storytellers: A Study in Septuagint Translation Technique

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Translators As Storytellers is a multidisciplinary study in Septuagint translation technique. John Beck combines linguistic, narrative-critical, and narrative-geographical approaches to select narrative texts. He is particularly interested in how these three approaches provide the clearest picture of the translator's literary sensitivity and inform the notion that the translators of the Septuagint were storytellers.

In chapter 1 Beck deals with the rationale, significance, limitations, and method of his study. His rationale is that not only Hebrew narrative, but also translations, have a literary dimension and that translations may mimic or alter the literary dimension of the parent text. In terms of the significance of the study, Beck expands the boundaries of narrative criticism beyond the parent text to the translated text, even including the artful use of geography. He also seeks to go beyond the traditional translation technique studies that focus on linguistic components of the text and are frequently done from a text-critical point of view by considering how the linguistic components impact the literary dimension of Hebrew narrative and its Greek translation. He limits the amount of space dedicated to pure linguistic analysis and avoids dealing with text-critical issues. He follows Tov's

assertion that the majority of the differences between the Masoretic text and the versions are produced through translation style and not a different *Vorlage*. However, in at least one place a textual variant in the *Vorlage*, rather than a literary choice, is more likely to be the cause of the reading of the Greek text (Jonah 1:9). His text selections are drawn from the three sections of the Hebrew Bible: the Pentateuch (Gen 22; 34; Exod 13–14; Num 13), the Prophets (Judg 4; 1 Sam 31; 2 Sam 6; Jonah 1; 3–4), and the Writings (Job 1–2; Ruth 1–2; 1 Chr 10; 13). Beck uses three models for his linguistic, narrative-critical, and narrative geographical studies that he develops in the following three chapters.

In chapter 2 Beck looks at linguistic components of the texts to determine the consistency or the percentage of literalness. After summarizing various linguistic studies of translation technique, he divides the linguistic components into the more frequently studied and easily quantified lexical features (morpheme preservation, noun number, independent personal pronoun) and grammatical features (verb forms, person/number, and clause coordination). By combining lexical and grammatical features, he aims for a more balanced and accurate picture of literalness than studies that focus on just one feature. Considerable attention is given to the translation of verb forms, taking into account tense, aspect, and discourse prominence. In the latter he follows Porter's analysis of Greek (background, foreground, and frontground) and Longacre and Niccacci's analysis of Hebrew. Unfortunately, however, Porter and Longacre use the terms *background* and *foreground* in diametrically opposite ways, which is confusing to readers of the literature, and Beck's analysis does not relieve the confusion! He is interested in how variations in literalness affect the literary experience of the reader, but frequently he just observes phenomena without expanding on how the reader is impacted. In the first example from Gen 22:5 he observes that the middle verb in a coordinated three verb chain is reduced to a participle. He states, "This diminishes the literary impact, ... altering the literary experience for the Greek reader" (30), without elucidating further in what way. Sometimes his analysis is not so careful. In 22:9–10 he counts a chain of seven *waw*-consecutive clauses. Beck states that chain is broken by three circumstantial participles in translation, when in fact it is broken by only one circumstantial participle and by an infinitive (but it is preceded by another circumstantial participle in 22:8). This reduces confidence in his statistical presentation, which consists of percentages in tabular form, without a breakdown as to how these percentages were derived, thus making verification more difficult.

His analysis of multiple features indicates some interesting variations (with most variation in percentage of literalness in the translation of the verb) in a basically literal approach to translation (indicated by an average of 90 percent literalness for all of the texts). Job was the least literal text, with an average of 81 percent literalness; 1 Chr 10 was the most literal, with 94 percent. He concludes that, while a linguistic study serves textual criticism well, there are limited literary insights to be gained from this approach alone and that there is need to resort to narrative criticism to gain further insights.

Chapter 3 begins with a useful introduction to narrative criticism based on the works of Alter, Berlin, Sternberg, Bar-Efrat, and Gunn and Fewell. Beck addresses five components of narrative—plot, narration, characterization, the use of time, and the play of words—focusing his analysis to the characterization of the main figure of the narrative, the use of time, and the patterning play of words for the same group of texts covered in the previous chapter. He first examines the story from the perspective of the Hebrew narrative and then looks at the Greek story. He points out some nice aspects of the narrative literary sensitivity of the Hebrew authors in their use of the Hebrew language. On the whole, the Greek translation preserves the Hebrew story, with 2 Sam 6, Jonah, and Job evidencing the most significant literary adjustments. These adjustments are mostly in the realm of characterization, with the Greek translation giving a more favorable impression of David (emphasizing his dancing more than his being uncovered) and making Michal’s criticism more petty and less convincing (2 Sam 6), enhancing the negative impression of Saul (1 Chr 10), reducing Jonah’s anger to grief, and mitigating Job’s wife’s abrupt response to his sufferings by a lengthy addition giving her side of the story.

Chapter 4 deals with narrative geography. Beck begins his analysis by illustrating how geography impacts secular literature. Then he mentions a paucity of references to geography in biblical narrative criticism, Bar-Efrat’s section “The Shaping of Space” in his monograph *The Art of Biblical Narrative* containing the most sustained treatment. Beck proposes a method to analyze biblical texts: (1) identify the geographical features in narrative (e.g., places and physical geographical features); (2) understand the geographical features (in their location, using atlases, ancient sources, and archaeology, to approximate the original reader’s geographical sensitivity); and (3) determine the literary function of geography in the text. He restricts himself to three of the twelve passages mentioned above (Num 13; Judg 4; Ruth 1), since these passages have the greatest amount of geographical material among his selected texts. His analysis of geography in the Hebrew story in these three passages is detailed and thoughtful. His analysis of the Greek story produces little in the way of insight, with the text mimicking the literary role of geography in the Hebrew text with at most minimal variations. Mostly the variation betrays the translator’s unfamiliarity with some of the geographical features of the Hebrew text or a lack of preserving some of the meaningful etymology of place names when the names are transliterated into Greek.

In the concluding chapter Beck summarizes the data from the preceding three chapters. He concludes that the narrative-critical assessment provides the most precise appraisal of the translator’s literary sensitivity. In his comparison of data from the three approaches, Beck concludes that there is no consistent correlation between his vague narrative-critical categories of slight, moderate, and significant adjustment and the percentages of literalness he obtained from his linguistic measurement. In addition, there is limited correlation with his geographical data and the other two methods. Within the methods,

the analysis of the verbs among the components of the linguistic analysis and the study of characterization among the components of the narrative-critical analysis offered the best picture of the translator's literary sensitivity. He concludes that the Septuagint translators were storytellers in their own right who did not just translate mechanically. However, the story they related was mostly a reflection of the Hebrew story.

Beck is to be commended for his endeavor to bring fresh insights to the study of translation technique and to shed new light on the translation of the Septuagint. It is unfortunate that not that much can be said about the storytelling of the translators, who were, on the whole, content to retell the Hebrew story and preserve the literary features as much as the target language permitted. The occasional embellishments and expansions give us a glimpse of the translators' view of characters in the story, but the translators are not nearly as innovative as is suggested by the title of his book. Beck's observations are pertinent, but his analysis and explanations are sometimes weak or lacking. However, apart from this and a few minor quibbles, I commend Beck's book as a worthwhile contribution to the field of Septuagint studies that opens up new areas for future study.