



[Re]Gained in Translation I

**Bibles, Theologies, and the Politics
of Empowerment**

Sabine Dievenkorn / Shaul Levin (eds.)

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Bibles, Theologies, and the Politics of Empowerment

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Foreword

Athalya Brenner-Idan

A short story: Anecdote from teaching

Once upon a time...

No. A date is required.

In 1996, the then Faculty of Theology at the Universiteit van Amsterdam, The Netherlands, invited me to serve as a visiting professor for a semester. Among my tasks was a course on Hebrew Bible prophecy. The UvA was then and still is in principle a secular city university; however, the faculty then cooperated with the Dutch Protestant churches, in the sense that the churches authorized its course offerings as part of education for future pastors and officials. Indeed, the Protestant leaning at the faculty was unmistakable.

The course was interesting, for both sides. The students were a motley crew in their beliefs: from Christian secularist, perhaps originally believers to traditionalist and orthodox, to Jewish secularists to orthodox to non-orthodox, even a Muslim or two. Obviously for the place, the majority of students were Protestants, by birth or practice of various degrees.

I taught in English from the Hebrew, using English Bible translations such as the *NRSV*, *KJV*, *JPSS*. The group was attentive and diligent. It seemed like a good experience for all.

At the end of the course, and in the interest of lightness and a party atmosphere for the summary, I announced that the film *Life of Brian* will be screened, then discussed. For those of us who don't remember, it was a Monty Python critical satire from 1979, ostensibly about biblical prophecy at the times of Jesus, which acquired a cult status. The film was extremely funny and, like all Monty Python work, both irreverent and deeply serious about its topic and its implications for contemporaneous politics. In short, it was an artistic translation of biblical literature.

Just before that scheduled class, a (male) student came to me and asked to talk privately for a minute. He informed me that he found the film disrespectful for the

Bible and that his beliefs (orthodox Protestant) didn't allow him to watch it and asked to be excused. He couldn't be convinced. He claimed repeatedly that the Bible shouldn't be made fun of, and that this representation, or 'translation' as I called it, was unsavory and disrespectful to his bible (which he knew without watching the film). To my question, "Does it show the Bible?" He answered, "No." Another question: "Is it a proper translation?" "No" again. "What is a proper translation?" Answer: "The *Statenvertaling*. The *Statenvertaling* is not just a translation. For me and my community, it *is* the Bible itself and the only Bible. This film makes fun of our faith and our Bible." "And what have I been teaching you the whole term, from the original Hebrew?" "Your Bible, not mine."

The student was uncomfortable yet adamant. In his view, this film was apostasy and against proper biblical faith, as inherent in his Bible. His translated Bible. The only Bible. He was excused from the film session.

The case of the *Statenvertaling* and other Dutch translations of the Bible

Translations into Dutch of the "Bible" – Old Testament, New Testament, and Apocryphal books – were made since the high Middle Ages. Most extant ones are limited in scope and have not enjoyed a canonized status. They were made not on the basis of the Hebrew text but second hand: from Jerome's Latin *Vulgate*.¹

However, and here I quote *verbatim* from the official *Statenvertaling* site, in English:

The *Statenvertaling* ("translation of the States", or Authorized Version) was completed in 1637. Innovative about this reformatory bible translation was that it was translated directly from the most original sources available at the time – just like Luther's translation (1522-1534) and the King James Version (1611) – and not from the *Vulgata*. However, the influence of this Latin translation (382-405) is manifest, especially in the difficult parts.

The *Statenvertaling* was ordered by the States General at the Dordrecht synod (1618-1619). The six translators tried to remain as

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/biblical-literature/Medieval-and-modern-versions-Dutch-French-and-German>, accessed February 2022.

close as possible to the original texts; therefore the text is full of 'Hebraisms': text seeming Hebrew.

The Statenvertaling has had quite some impact on the Dutch language. It has been the authoritative [sic] translation for most Dutch protestants since the 17th century, until a new translation was published in 1951-1952.

A committee established by the minister of Education concluded (2006) that the translation had so much influence on Dutch culture that it deserved a place among the 50 deciding moments in Dutch history.²

Let me highlight some points and add others. Authorized translations in other European vernaculars, inspired by the Reformation, gave impetus to local translations (including change of contents, such as deletions of, for instance, some apocryphal texts from the canon) and their more democratic uses in Reform (non-Catholic) faith communities. Such translations quickly became the canonized Bible of their communities, to the exclusion of others, and received many updates over the centuries. The same happened with the *Statenvertaling*: it became the canon of the [re]reformed communities and remains such until this day. (Other protestant communities, such as the Lutheran communities, preferred their own translations that were often linked to Luther's German translation choices.) Many updates and many Bible translations later, the *Statenvertaling*, in one of its editions, is still the preferred [Re]Reform church Bible: actually, the only one, even for scholars of those religious communities when outside their scholarly zone.

A new and interconfessional translation, *De Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling (NBV)* is written in modern, natural Dutch. It was published in 2004, with the participation of many academic scholars and faith persons, under the auspices of Dutch universities, the Dutch Bible Society (NBG), the Catholic Bible Institute (KBS), and other organizations. A revision of the translation, *NBV21*, has recently been released. It is made from the original languages and meant to be the standard translation for The Netherlands and Flanders. It is touted as "not only the Bible for the 21st century, but also the Bible of the 21st century."³ The translation is

² <https://www.statenvertaling.net/over/english.html>, accessed February 2022.

³ Further information may be found on the NBV21 website, in Dutch. <https://nbv21.nl/over-de-nbv21/>.

indeed more up to date than other Dutch translations, taking into account scholarly work on languages and interpretation and method. The issue of interpretation via translation is consciously taken up. The language, albeit still “poetic”, and layout are inviting.

And yet, and perhaps because it is a new upstart (2004, 2021) and damages the authority of the *Statenvertaling* and its equivalents, the *NBV* (*NBV21*) is *not* the Bible of most Dutch people, certainly not of traditional, conservative faith communities. And these are the communities that need the translations the most, and also look to them for practice and therapy. Time will tell.

Reflections and lessons

For me, as a born-Jewish and Israeli, “The Bible” is first and foremost the Hebrew Bible, a book, in Hebrew (granted, some short Aramaic texts are there too), whose books are arranged in a certain tripartite order and is therefore also known as the *TaNakh*. As a scholar, I add to that the knowledge that what it is a library with history, much of it still mysterious, a long time in developing and still being developed and researched and interpreted and adapted. However, for me and my ilk one thing is certain: this Hebrew Bible is the original canon.

Not so for non-Jews. Obviously. Their Biblical library has two parts: the Old Testament, which includes “my” Hebrew Bible in another language (originally Greek, or Greek and Aramaic) and another book order, leading up and supposedly pre-informing the New Testament (not to mention other canonized texts, of Jewish or other origin, which are to be found in some Christian Bibles but not others). So, Bible or Bibles? Obviously, the plural, with many distinctions between communities, and many similarities too, and mostly in translation.⁴

So, while the “origin” is not disputed, its details, and prominence, and impact on daily life of communities has been and is being contested. Whose Bibles are they anyway? Everybody’s, as applied to an originally unique, wide-ranging, cultural consumer commodity. Is there one authoritative, definitive Bible? Of

⁴ Again, on a personal note. My response to the teaching anecdote recounted above was that, when appointed to the Bible Chair at the Universiteit van Amsterdam, I asked the University’s leading board to change the name of the Chair from “Old Testament” to “Hebrew Bible/Old Testament.” The request was immediately granted.

course, not; there are many. Which Bible are we talking about? One of many in each case, the one that suits the needs and conditions and ideologies of its users. Are The Bible and Bibles abused, misused, and used well in the process? Certainly.

This volume

The Editors of this volume do us the service of taking us back precisely to this cluster of complex issues. How, by what means, and where are Bibles [re]created by translation for past or contemporary Christian/Jewish audiences? What is the translations' correspondence with the "original" texts? Does the translation adopted by a certain community serve to enhance benefits or disadvantages to members or groups of that community, and to whom within or outside it? What makes a translation the Bible of choice for a faith community, to the rejection of others? How are distinctions made between a scholarly understanding of "the Bible as it was," that is, the meaning of the ancient texts, and their acceptance into faith communities in their morphed, translated shape? How does the politics of economies, geographical factors, ethnic factors, gender, sexual orientation, ageism, superstition, class, and many others influence the translations that form the basis of life for Jews and Christians? How do Bible translations serve as conversion tools? And, ultimately, since translations are mostly the product of elite practitioners, how do they serve to advance the dominant, controlling, colonial (in the widest sense of the term) interests – be they explicit or implicit – of their makers? What, if any, is the balance in each translation between text-critical and linguistic-historical knowledge of the translators themselves, from antiquity until today, and their choices? How do we relate to the fact that, *pace* knowledge, even the same people prefer the Bible translation they are attached to for cultic purposes to the text they know as basic?

Answers to these questions vary, of course, and are time- and place sensitive. Accusations and exposures are necessary, to be sure. But answers cannot therefore be definitive: they can just afford an insight into the cases described. The editors of this volume collected articles of various hues and variegated "voices." Some deal with a wider spectrum of an accepted translation, others with a finer point. Several point to the damaging potential of a certain translation or its incorrectness, with or without suggestions for change of translation and interpretation. Others

reflect a situation without much judgment. Still more examples deal with the problem of a narrow, specific translation choice, or with the benefit of a translation as a whole. In short, we have here a tasting menu. It is high time that we research contemporary texts that go by the names “Bible” and discuss their merits and demerits for societies on a global situation as well as local contexts.

The questions listed here do not amount to a re-invention of the Bible translation wheel. This volume nevertheless highlights them and their impact in many worthwhile and eye-opening modes.

Go ahead and read this volume. It will provoke you into reflecting anew by problematizing the concepts of “Bible” and “Bibles” against disparate contexts. You will not regret it.

Introduction

Shaul Levin and Sabine Dievenkorn

Why translate? The question is almost as ancient as communication itself. While the obvious answer – so that non-speakers of the original language may understand – seems to cover all possibilities, it begs a host of new queries attesting to the fact that the issue is, of course, far from simple. What non-speakers? Who shall be regarded as one? Which is “the original language”? And define *original*, for that matter. Understand what? For what purpose? In which context?

While the general question applies to all possible contexts, none seem to be as historically loaded, as culturally significant, as linguistically minded and mined as translations of the Bible. In the most general terms, biblical translation is the art and practice of rendering the Bible into languages other than those in which it was originally written. Both the Old and New Testaments have a long history of translation, with the number of languages into which they have been translated growing exponentially during the past 2,300 years. In fact, analyses show that this number has more than doubled every 40 years. If current trends continue, 3,500 languages will have a portion of the Bible translated by 2026, and in less than fifty years, all 7,881 languages on earth will have Scriptures available.¹

As the number of world languages into which the Scriptures are being translated continues to grow, it is safe to assume that a large portion of biblical translations produced on an ongoing, continuous basis, is in fact into languages in which previous translations already exist. Exact statistics are difficult to come by, but a quick look at any number of online tools will suffice to attest to the extent of this phenomenon. Take for instance the *Find A Bible* forum and homepage, which catalogs “4877 Bible Versions and 23,909 Scripture Resources in 4,598 Languages.” These include no less than 52 different English versions produced since the year 2000, alongside 14 different Spanish versions, 13 French, 9 German, 6 Russian, 8 in the Kaqchikel language of Guatemala, and 6 in Mandarin Chinese, to name but a few, all created within the past two decades.²

¹ Matthias Gerner. 2018. “Why worldwide Bible translation grows exponentially.” *Journal of Religious History*, Vol. 42, No. 2, 145–180.

² Find A Bible. <https://find.bible/>, accessed 19 March 2022.

Why make yet another translation of the Bible? Why translate *again* what has already been translated? One may recur to the obvious abovementioned answer: so that non-speakers of the original language may understand. Which would beg the same set of queries from a partly similar, partly different angle: Who are these non-speakers *now*? What is it, *exactly*, that they don't speak or understand? In which context? For what purpose? Which is, *now*, the original?

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Of course, none of this is very novel. According to your logic, writes Jerome to Augustine some 1,600 years ago within a correspondence regarding his retranslation of the Bible into Latin, "I ought not to have given a translation, after this had been already done by the ancients."³ For, as Augustine's argument seemed to go, passages already interpreted in the past were either obscure or plain: If obscure, one is as likely to be mistaken as one's formers; if plain, how is one to believe that one's predecessors were mistaken?

All our predecessors in the Lord "have expounded either what was obscure or what was plain," continues Jerome his reply to Augustine's query. "On the same principle, no one would ever venture to speak on any subject after others have pronounced their opinion" (Jerome to Augustine, 404 AD).

Are "the canonical Scriptures known as the work of the Seventy translators" but an opinion? – One can almost imagine Augustine to have said. "For the latter has no mean authority, seeing that it has obtained so wide circulation, and was the one which the apostles used." And who, upon discrepancies arising between the "*original*" translation and the new one, will submit "to have so many Latin and Greek authorities pronounced to be in the wrong?" (Augustine to Jerome, 403 AD).

³ Correspondence of Augustine and Jerome concerning Jerome's Latin Translation of the Bible. The English translations here and throughout are excerpted from the *Letters of Augustine* (No. 28, 71, 82) and the *Letters of Jerome* (No. 112) in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Translated into English with Prolegomena and Explanatory Notes under the Editorial Supervision of Henry Wace and Philip Schaff*. Oxford: Parker; New York: Christian Literature Co., 1890-1900. They can be also found here: <http://www.bible-researcher.com/vulgate2.html>, accessed 19 March 2022.

Clearly, the issue of authority looms large when the text in question is not a mere combination of words but is rather considered – by whom? according to which theology? – to *be* the Word of God. For that which “had been already done by the ancients” has not remained dormant. Along the years, it worked its way into religion and culture, language and literature, community, geopolitics, and identity. And it has undergone a wide-scale institutionalization, infusing its dominion with a further set of meanings, values and implications, which are impossible to ignore. Augustine certainly cannot:

A certain bishop, one of our brethren, having introduced in the church over which he presides the reading of your [Jerome’s] version, came upon a word in the book of the prophet Jonah, of which you have given a very different rendering from that which had been of old familiar to the senses and memory of all the worshippers, and had been chanted for so many generations in the church. Thereupon arose such a tumult in the congregation, especially among the Greeks, correcting what had been read, and denouncing the translation as false, that the bishop was compelled to ask the testimony of the Jewish residents (it was in the town of Oea). These, whether from ignorance or from spite, answered that the words in the Hebrew manuscripts were correctly rendered in the Greek version, and in the Latin one taken from it. What further need I say? The man was compelled to correct your version in that passage as if it had been falsely translated, as he desired not to be left without a congregation -- a calamity which he narrowly escaped (Augustine to Jerome, 403 AD).

Indeed, “a wrong translation of some word in Jonah” could have the far-reaching ramification of “a worthy bishop narrowly escap[ing] losing his charge through the clamorous tumult of his people” (Jerome to Augustine, 404 AD). But even what could be considered a “correct” – “more correct” than its predecessor? – translation may have grave consequences: “For if your [Jerome’s] translation begins to be more generally read in many churches, it will be a grievous thing that, in the reading of Scripture, differences must arise between the Latin Churches and the Greek Churches” (Augustine to Jerome, 403 AD). Thus,

my only reason for objecting to the public reading of your translation from the Hebrew in our churches was, lest, bringing forward anything which was, as it were, new and opposed to the authority of the Septuagint version, we should trouble by serious cause of offense the flocks of Christ, whose ears and hearts have become accustomed to listen to that version to which the seal of approbation was given by the apostles themselves (Augustine to Jerome, 405 AD).

When the stakes are so high, all is thrown into the line of argumentation, including translators' identity, known or attributed, as their religious affiliation is taken to bear directly on the theological foundation and legitimacy and thus, relevance, of the translation:

I am surprised that you do not read the books of the Seventy translators in the genuine form in which they were originally given to the world, but as they have been corrected, or rather corrupted, by Origen, with his obelisks and asterisks; and that you refuse to follow the translation, however feeble, which has been given by a Christian man, especially seeing that Origen borrowed the things which he has added from the edition of a man who, after the passion of Christ, was a Jew and a blasphemer (Jerome to Augustine, 404 AD).

But far from being a strictly theological discussion, some very pragmatic concerns arise, bearing directly on actual translational practice. Discrepancy between different versions of the Scriptures read in Latin and Greek Churches may easily be condemned by the production of the original in Greek, a language very widely known, says Augustine. But it may be difficult, perhaps impossible, to obtain the Hebrew documentation by which to defend deviations from the long-accepted version, as "originally given to the world" as they may be. And if Jews are consulted as to the meaning of the Hebrew text, and give a different opinion from that embedded in the new translation, "it will seem as if your [Jerome's] presence were indispensable, as being the only one who could refute their view; and it would be a miracle if one could be found capable of acting as arbiter between you and them" (Augustine to Jerome, 403 AD).

Retranslators of the Word of God may indeed serve themselves as indispensable, active arbiters in the process of adjusting the balance between the product of their

“acquaintance with the original language, and the conjectures of those who are able commentators on the Scripture” (Augustine to Jerome, 405 AD).

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Translations of the Bible have always taken place in the midst of tension between politics, ideology, and power. Decisions and inclinations, fluency and *Zeitgeist* play as serious a role as the person and personality, faith and worldview of the translators involved, their vocabulary, poetics, linguistic capacity.

Within theology, this was frequently ignored. It has often gone unnoticed how decisively and essentially translations and translational decisions influence dogmatics and hermeneutics. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God – not the Bible! The Greek word *βιβλίο* means, still today, simply ‘book’, and to prevent confusion, the term for Bible in Greek is *Αγία Γραφή*, ‘Holy Scripture’. With the immeasurable authority and proclamation of the book to be translated and its stories as God’s Word, not focusing on the process of translating was stating the obvious. The issue at stake is the Word of God and the question of which translation is referred to is seldom addressed; and if it is, it mostly remains unanswered.

It seems as if the Holy Word itself loses in significance if the comprehension of the word is preceded by an a-priori understanding. You know what it is you are going to read before you read it. This is especially true in less scientifically-prone contexts and more distant-from-science centers. It is therefore perhaps very obvious that Ivone Gebara, in this volume, takes as her starting point her theology and credo, a patriarchal theology and tradition against which translational word design may seem almost incidental. This, too, may be recognized and appreciated as a translational process.

In some regions and denominations, the written and printed word appears so distant that it seems to disappear behind basic dogmatic decisions. It is no longer dogmatically relevant whether Mary was a young woman or a virgin, whether Paul addressed a deacon – a man – or spoke to a deaconess – a woman, whether places of worship in the first Christian communities were synagogues and only became churches in the process of the latter’s coming into being.

The translational power of translated biblical texts is theologically important. And so, the question arises again and again: in the midst of tensions between politics, ideology, and power, who are those empowered with producing newer, reworked, revised Bible translations?

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History has seen countless retranslations of the Bible into languages in which it had already appeared, and numerous times at that. The reasoning provided for such endeavors may range from simple and straightforward, for example that the language of the former translation has become obsolete, to vague and complex, such as the need to provide the congregation the Holy Word in a form to which it can relate better than the existing one(s). Agency, legitimacy, reception, theology, institution, identity, faith – all feed into the equation according to which retranslations of the Bible are initiated, produced, disseminated, and used.

How far have institutional religion and the practice of translation come since Jerome and Augustine's correspondence of the early 5th century? What are the considerations according to which Biblical retranslations are being produced in current, 21st century, contexts, and what awaits them?

The papers collected in this volume address the issue of current Bible retranslations in a variety of angles and scopes. Some focus on the greater philosophy and general principles while others embark on an almost surgical examination of the specific treatment of key concepts and paragraphs. Whereas some of the papers provide a broader historical survey of practices leading to the current context in which retranslation has been deemed necessary or desirable, others illuminate a snapshot, an occurrence, a gem. From retranslations of the Hebrew Bible to those of the Old and New Testaments, to mutual influence and interconnectedness of Christian and Jewish translational traditions – they all deal in one way or another with the question of what is to be gained with the production of a new translation where, at times, many a previous one has already existed; with the whats, the whys and the hows of Biblical retranslation in current contexts.

The first part of the book, titled **Theories, Theologies, Translations**, opens with *Scott Elliott's* intriguing idea of re-translation as perpetual pre-writing, drawing on the work of Roland Barthes in order to reflect on re-translation in relation to themes of resonance, repetition, and remembrance. Referring to two

contemporary translations of the New Testament letters of 2 Peter and Jude, he argues that modern language translations relate to their “originals” in much the same way as the former relates to the latter, in fact, in much the same way as the writer of 2 Peter effectively repeats, reworks, and retranslates Jude. **Christo H. J. van der Merwe** aims to demonstrate that the term direct translation, as it is used by the Bible Society of South Africa, is not merely a new label for a stilted word-for-word translation. Rather, it proposes a solution for vexing translational problems within an academically justifiable translation model that was formulated for the new Bible in Afrikaans. **Pavlov Innokenty**, ecumenical theologian and translator of biblical texts into current-day Russian, shares in an interview his outlook on the current state of Bible translation in Russia, the role it plays in the churches, its implications in the context of politics, ideology and tradition, and examples of his own translational opposition of the mainstream. **Luise von Flotow** examines the literal “letter of the text” translations produced by three different English women translators of segments of the book of Genesis, spanning almost 150 years. Basing her analysis on Antoine Berman’s theoretical work, she focuses on how these translations and commentaries of Genesis work toward and produce very different, often quite “feminist” interpretations of the ancient words. **Ivone Gebara** approaches the theme of *eating a forbidden fruit* from a theological-philosophical point of view embedded in her “certain feminism.” For her, translating is an attempt at approximation, not a reproduction of the past with its questions, but rather a wish that the text surprises us with its richness or poverty as we inscribe it with the mark of our emotions and history. The first section ends with **Robert Alter**’s explanation of why, after so many English versions, a new translation of the Hebrew Bible is needed, in which he describes his endeavor as an experiment in re-presenting biblical narrative prose in a language that conveys the semantic nuances and lively orchestration of literary effects of the Hebrew, while having stylistic and rhythmic integrity as literary English.

The second part, titled **Retranslations and Politics of Empowerment**, starts with **Ivoni Richter Reimer**’s own translation of Acts 16 carried out in frame of a critical dialogue with previously existing translations. Anchored in heuristic pragmatics and feminist liberation hermeneutics, her analysis contributes to the reinterpretation and reconstruction of women’s stories at the beginning of Christianity as well as to their empowerment today. **Jeremy Punt** investigates heteronormativity as a challenge for empowering Bible translation in South(ern)

Africa, where many social identities are refracted through the prism of religious consciousness. Exploring biblical verses often cited with regard to sexual orientation, he looks into the role and responsibility of the translation of contentious New Testament texts related to LGBTQI-identity. **Clara Carbonell Ortiz** conducts a philological analysis of the biblical verb גַּלַּשׁ from a gender perspective, claiming that the seemingly harmonious consensus around its traditional rendering as ‘to rape’ or ‘ravish’ hides the extraordinary complexity of this verb. Considering both biblical and extra-biblical information, she assesses the suitability of different proposals of translation, some of which deviate from its habitual alleged meaning. **Susanne Scholz** sets out to denaturalize Lev 18:22, offering a linguistic, grammatical, and hermeneutical reading that interprets the verse as a prohibition against male-on-male incestuous rape. Interrogating preconceived assumptions about the verse’s translation by mining its eight Hebrew words for alternative possibilities of meaning, she challenges the mainstream view that it aims to prohibit “homosexuality” among men and implicitly also among women. Closing this section, **David E. S. Stein** examines the impact of discourse functions on rendering the Biblical Hebrew noun אִישׁ in a gender-sensitive English translation of the *Torah*. Drawing on four sample biblical passages, he evaluates the optimal rendering of אִישׁ into English, given the growing differential between what אִישׁ meant in ancient Hebrew and what ‘man’ nowadays conveys, with regard to their referent’s age and gender.

The third and last part of the book, titled **Revisions and Legacies**, begins with **Hilla Karas**’s exploration of the *Ram Bible*, a 2008 translation of the Hebrew Bible into current day Hebrew, and its reception by the Israeli society. Comparing it to previous modern Hebrew versions of the Bible published in recent decades, she analyzes the turbulent public debate regarding its publication and the sometimes-heated arguments in favor or against it. **Lourens de Vries** investigates the heritage of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig in modern English, French and Dutch translations of the Bible, especially their notion of the *Gesprochenheit* or ‘spokenness’ of the Hebrew Bible. He shows that while later translators may take their oral-aural ideas as an inspirational starting point, they also reject many key parts of their heritage. In a similar vein, **Abigail Gillman** looks into *Die Bibel in gerechter Sprache* in light of the history of German Jewish Bible translation, a minor translation tradition that has also aspired to inclusivity. Against the editors’ stated claim to create a translation that does justice to the

Hebrew Bible, Judaism, Jewish history, and the Jewish-Christian dialogue, she examines the extent to which their aims and methods draw upon the tradition of German Jewish Bibles going back to the 18th century. *Ursula Kocher and Martin Karrer* present the pronounced goals of the newly revised Luther Bible in frame of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation edition. Aiming to re-implement Luther's maxim of "*dem Volk auf's Maul schauen*" (to listen to the common man) after 500 years of numerable changes in the German language and language awareness, they sum up its motto with "as much Luther as possible, as much adjustment as necessary." Within the same tradition, *Silke Petersen* compares four different German Bible translations with regard to the role played in them by gender discourses. In addition to the question of inclusive translational choices, she discusses various translations of official titles for women and the rendering of biblical statements on gender difference. Closing the book, *Ervais Fotso* reflects on the usage of instructional material added to biblical texts in the context of the intriguing field of oral Bible translation. Proclaiming a "retranslative" nature of oral Bible translation at large, he demonstrates his claims through the analysis of a new oral translation of the Book of Jude in the Ghomala language of Cameroon.

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Retranslations "deliberately mark the passage of time by aiming to distinguish themselves from a previous version through differences in discursive strategies and interpretations," says Venuti. Their effort is not merely historical, connected with a specific moment, but historiographical, signaling and rationalizing their differences from previous versions. They reflect various changes in the translating culture but at the same time, can also produce such changes "by inspiring new ways of reading and appreciating foreign texts."⁴ Bible translations have expiry dates, says de Vries: languages and spelling systems change, insights in biblical languages change, exegesis change, the base texts used for Bible translation change, technologies of writing, copying, and making book change, and what people want to do with their Bibles changes. But behind all the factors driving constant retranslation of the Bible lies one overarching fundamental factor: "the

⁴ Lawrence Venuti. 2004. "Retranslations: The creation of value." *Bucknell Review* 47(1), 25–38, here 35–36.

deeply felt need for actualization of the Word of God,” that is, to make it “clear, actual and relevant for new generations in new circumstances.”⁵

[Re]gained in Translation I: Bibles, Theologies, and the Politics of Empowerment brings together scholars working at the intersection of Translation Studies, Bible Studies, and Theology, all of which share a special point of interest concerning the status of the Scriptures as texts fundamentally based on the act of translation and its recurring character. In translation as well as in our interpretations, says Ivone Gebara in this volume, we seek “the recontextualization of elements that make our interpretation the most faithful to the sovereign will for Good that we seek.” Her refined words may serve as a humble yet mighty guideline for the reading of *[Re]gained in Translation* itself.

Kiryat Tivon
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⁵ Lourens de Vries. 2019. “Retranslations of Holy Scriptures: Why keep translating the Bible?” *Journal of Biblical Text Research*, 45, 254–270, here 261.

THEORIES, THEOLOGIES, TRANSLATIONS

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Resonance, repetition, and remembrance: Re-translation as perpetual pre-writing

Scott S. Elliott

ABSTRACT

The New Testament letters of 2 Peter and Jude bear a close relationship and a striking resemblance to one another. To the extent that they are written by different authors, they present translators with a unique problem and an opportunity to further theorize the nature and practice of translation. This essay draws on the work of Roland Barthes in order to reflect on re-translation in relation to themes of resonance, repetition, and remembrance with special reference to these letters and two contemporary English-language translations of the New Testament. Taking translation in both a broad and a narrow sense, both in terms of its connotation and its denotation, I suggest that the writer of 2 Peter effectively repeats, reworks, and retranslates Jude, and that translators of this text effectively translate a translation. Arguably, by extension, modern language translations relate to their “originals” in much the same way as 2 Peter relates to Jude. The resultant oscillation between sameness and difference creates resonance. Remembrance and resonance are produced by means of a perversion, a perverse pleasure occasioned in part by the inevitable indeterminacy of form and style. Translations are thus regarded not in terms of readerly works motivated by either philological certainty (explanation) or dynamic equivalence (interpretation) but rather as writerly texts that embrace resonance, texts that reproduce in every sense of the term. As such, translation is at once reminiscently repetitious and perpetually preparatory, oscillating between sameness and difference, and between past and future, occupying an indeterminant, intermediate, resonant space of writing where meaning rustles.

To write another translation of the New Testament is probably something of a foolish venture. No matter what one produces [...] it will provoke consternation (and probably indignation) in countless breasts. There are so many traditions, denominations, assemblies, and devotions—so many magisteria, critical schools, theological factions, and assorted individuals with idiosyncratic spiritual commitments—that one can never hope to please everyone at once, or perhaps anyone entirely.

David Bentley Hart, *The New Testament*, xiii

In *The Preparation of the Novel*, Roland Barthes states that

as a general rule, the translations of the classics need to be revised: a translation needs to be redone every twenty-five years. Which says a lot about the *certitudes* of philology. Here, then, it's a matter of a Discourse, not of Explanation, nor indeed of Interpretation, but of *Resonance*.¹

In the following pages, I want to reflect on re-translation in relation to themes of resonance, repetition, and remembrance with special reference to the New Testament letters of 2 Peter and Jude and two contemporary English-language translations of the New Testament. Taking translation in both a broad and a narrow sense, both in terms of its connotation and its denotation, I suggest that the writer of 2 Peter effectively repeats, reworks, and retranslates Jude, and that translators of this text effectively translate a translation. Arguably, by extension, modern language translations relate to their “originals” in much the same way as 2 Peter relates to Jude. The resultant oscillation between sameness and difference creates resonance. Remembrance and resonance are produced by means of a perversion, a perverse pleasure occasioned in part by the inevitable indeterminacy of form and style.²

¹ Roland Barthes. 2011. *The Preparation of the Novel*. Trans. Kate Briggs. New York: Columbia University Press, 23; emphasis in the original.

² In Barthesian post-structuralism, “perverse acts are creative, sometimes involuntary acts that ‘split [...] the moral unity that society demands of every human product’ (PT 31/52). In perverse acts – including perverse texts – the antagonism of opposition is overcome by plurality, by uncontrolled difference. [...] Perversion opens up unconstrained, uncontrolled

Resonance and Translation

The Preparation of the Novel is a posthumously published lecture course that Barthes taught for the *Collège de France* in which he undertook to “find out what the Novel can be” by proceeding *as if* he had to write one.³ He is concerned primarily with the preparatory stage of notation that precedes writing. He focuses on “the exemplary achievement of all notation [...] Japanese haiku,” and specifically on its materiality, its desire, its domains, namely, “the individuation of the seasons and the times of day; the instance, contingency; mild affect,” and its limits: “the *conchetto* and narration.”⁴ The seminar running concurrently alongside the lecture course invoked the metaphor of the labyrinth:

[I]t was noted that the Labyrinth is perhaps a ‘pseudo’ metaphor in the sense that its form is so particular, so pregnant, the literal meaning predominates over the symbolic: the Labyrinth engenders narratives, not images. The seminar ended not with a conclusion but with a new question: not ‘What is a Labyrinth?’ nor indeed ‘How do you get out of one?’ but rather ‘Where does a Labyrinth begin?’⁵

Barthes’ remarks regarding resonance occur early in his discussion of Japanese haiku, and he uses “translation” both in a narrow sense, i.e., the translation of Japanese language into French language, and in a broad sense, i.e., “translating” an instance into a form. Concerning the latter, he describes haiku as “the conjunction of a ‘truth’ (not a conceptual truth, but of the *Instant*) and a form.”⁶ His comments reflect, in part, what Gérard Genette refers to as hypertextuality wherein a text is reworked either through simple, direct transformation (for instance, *Odyssey* to *Ulysses*) or complex, indirect transformation (for instance, *Odyssey* to *Aeneid*).⁷ Although, in this case, that which is complexly and indirectly

spaces for further writing, further reading, and more pleasure, Perversion is thus set against the congealed values and subjects of the ideological and the doxic; hence its link with the pre-Symbolic.” Joann M. Blais. 1993. *Severed Texts: Aspects of Aestheticization in Roland Barthes’ Post-Structural Writings*. University of British Columbia: Unpublished PhD Diss., 249.

³ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 377.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 377.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 378.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷ Gérard Genette. 1997. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 5-7. Genette speaks of translation at various points throughout *Palimpsests* and at length on pages 214-

transformed is, among other things, the temporal, transient, and transitory instances of lived experience. For Barthes, the haiku is “the exemplary form of the Notation of the Present, [the] minimal act of enunciation [...] an atom of a sentence that *notes* [...] a tiny element of ‘real,’ present, concomitant life.”⁸ Haiku resonates with life and with Barthes largely because it is primarily, if not entirely, denotative rather than connotative. Moreover, in Barthes, the hypertextuality of Genette is bi-directional in that haiku translates life – an instance – into a form, but it resists its crystallization into a work or a monument and instead highlights and echoes, re-presents, a certain textuality of life, which is to say something fabric, or fabricated, something fluid and fleeting.

What is striking in some ways (but less so in others for anyone familiar with his work) is that Barthes later says that he considers the pathos of native language “to be so important that [he] can’t bear translated works, however well translated,” and the basis for his disdain is that he receives “no pleasure from pleasure *copying it out*” [sic].⁹ Barthes wrote similar things concerning repetition in *The Pleasure of the Text*. For example,

The New is not a fashion, it is a value, the basis of all criticism: our evaluation of the world no longer depends, at least not directly, as in Nietzsche, on the opposition between noble and base, but on that between Old and New. [...] There is only one way left to escape the alienation of present-day society: *to retreat ahead of it*: every old language is immediately compromised, and every language becomes old once it is repeated. Now, encratic language (the language

18 where he identifies it as “the most visible form of transposition.” On the debate over where the limit of translatability is to be found, Genette contests the problematic distinction between poetry and prose, noting Mallarmé’s observation that “there is ‘verse’ as soon as there is ‘style,’” and concludes that “it would be better [...] to distinguish not between translatable texts (there are none) and untranslatable texts, but between those texts that are adversely affected by the inevitable flaws of translation (literary texts) and those that are unharmed by them: i.e., all other texts” (215-16). While I appreciate Genette’s effort and the distinction as far as it goes, I do not ultimately find it any more convincing or helpful. How would one factor in or categorize a translation of a translation, for example, if I were to translate one of the contemporary English translations of the New Testament discussed below into French? Where and how do form and style enter the picture? Meanwhile, Genette’s distinction is precarious by virtue of insufficiently accounting for the role context plays in determining “harm.”

⁸ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 23.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 289; emphasis in the original.

produced and spread under the protection of power) is statutorily a language of repetition.¹⁰

In other words, nothing in language is *essentially* “new”; it is only deemed “new” relative to some often-unnamed point of comparison and in the interest of some particular discourse. Repetition, erstwhile, serves the interests of discourse, or of what Barthes frequently refers to as “Doxa.”¹¹ However, Barthes notes that certain repetitions *can* produce bliss:

[T]o repeat excessively is to enter into loss, into the zero of the signified. But: in order for repetition to be erotic, it must be formal, literal, and in our culture this flaunted (excessive) repetition reverts to eccentricity, thrust toward various marginal regions of music. The bastard form of mass culture is humiliated repetition: content, ideological schema, the blurring of contradictions—these are repeated, but the superficial forms are varied: always new books, new programs, new films, news items, but always the same meaning.¹²

Certain repetitions evoke, gesture toward, and approximate what Barthes has elsewhere referred to as “zero degree writing.” But the emphasis here is on form, which is where we are most often inclined either to not consciously recognize repetition or else to disparage it somehow. But for Barthes, form and content are always (that is, not solely in the case of poetic verse, for instance) inseparable when it comes to language and to the ephemeral twinklings of life, the self, and so on. Therefore, he concludes, “in short, the word can be erotic on two opposing

¹⁰ Roland Barthes. 1975. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill & Wang, 40; emphasis in the original.

¹¹ See, for example, Roland Barthes. 1977. *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. Trans. Richard Howard. Berkeley: University of California Press, 68-69: “Everything seems to suggest that his discourse proceeds according to a two-term dialectic: popular opinion and its contrary, *Doxa* and its paradox, the stereotype and the novation, fatigue and freshness, relish and disgust: *I like/I don’t like*. This binary dialectic is the dialectic of meaning itself (*marked/not marked*) and of Freudian game the child plays (*Fort/Da*): the dialectic of value. Yet is this quite true? In him, another dialectic appears, trying to find expression: the contradiction of the terms yields in his eyes by the discovery of a third term, which is not a synthesis but a *translation*: everything comes back, but it comes back as Fiction, i.e., at another turn of the spiral.”

¹² Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 41-42.