

ETHICAL CONCERNS AND WORLDVIEW PERSPECTIVES IN BIBLE TRANSLATION: AN INQUIRY INTO THE ETHICS OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

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Introduction

All human activity is subject to ethical scrutiny. We now speak about the ethics of banking, we reflect on the ethics of science, we discuss the ethics of medical practice, and so forth. Multinationals present themselves as organizations that stand for ethics in business. Large breweries, for instance, promote responsible drinking, and the tobacco industry is forced to label its products with health warnings. Bible translation and Bible publishing have to be ethical also. The text that is translated and published is a product that is offered to the public. The producer has a responsibility for the use made of the product by the public. Bible publishers therefore must promote responsible use of biblical texts.

Two ethical issues emerge that I want to address in this paper: 1) What is a legitimate translation of ancient biblical texts? and 2) What are the implications of publishing in our present world ancient biblical texts that reflect an ancient worldview and morality?

What is a legitimate translation?

An ethical evaluation of Bible translation assumes certain norms. No one can just invent norms and impose these on the translation work. The norms need first of all to relate to the nature of the activity, and second, they need to relate to the general values and norms that are accepted by the community to which the translators and the readers of the translation belong.

What norms should be applied?

Before judging translation activity as a human activity subject to norms, we need to agree on what the nature of Bible translation is. What are we doing when we engage in Bible translation? Only after an understanding is reached on what Bible translation actually is can we decide what norms should be applied in the evaluation process. Norms are derived from the ideas people have about translation.¹ So

1 Andrew Chesterman, *Memes of Translation* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1997), 51.

it really matters how you perceive translation. If you perceive translation as a reproduction of the meaning of a source text in a target text, you adopt equivalence as the main norm. A translation is then considered good when the equivalence norm is sufficiently met. In the concept of dynamic equivalence, equivalence is indeed the main norm; this will be discussed in greater detail below.

The French philosopher Derrida, however, perceives translation not as a reproduction of the meaning of a source text, but as a new creation of the translator, based on the translator's interpretation of the source text. He argues that translation is not more of the same, but something new. It is the difference between the source text and the target text that really matters. Hence, equivalence is not such a crucial norm.²

As mentioned above, the very ideas people have about translation give birth to specific norms. This is true for all kinds of translation. When we research the ethics of *Bible* translation, we need to pay attention to another issue: the perception of the nature of the source text. The biblical text is perceived by large audiences as the word of God. This perception also provides specific norms for the evaluation of translations of biblical texts.

The perception of the nature of the biblical text

The idea that biblical texts are just like any other texts is not tenable, since many people perceive these texts as originating from a non-human source. The theories about the origin of these texts are relevant for our inquiry. Chesterman rightly points to the quandary in which translators of the Bible find themselves when they believe that the Scriptures are the word of God: "Because: if you believe that the scriptures are indeed the Word of God, and if you believe that you have a mission to spread this Word, you quickly find yourself in a quandary. The Word is holy; how then can it be changed?"³

Translators of the Bible should understand what they and their audiences mean by the concept "word of God." If "word of God" is understood metaphorically, then there is room for interpretation, and translation of the written texts poses no threat through its unavoidable component of change, but when the Bible is perceived in the literal sense as *words of God*, translation is impossible; the biblical texts are then in principle untranslatable. In that case, the text is perceived as words that are literally spoken by God or by angels as God's agents. The latter is a perception represented by the official Islamic position on the Qur'an. This position states that it is not possible to translate the Qur'an, but one can only explain the meaning of a Qur'an text in a paraphrase. So no human being can translate the holy Arabic text, according to Islamic belief.

The idea that translations of the Bible should be quite literal is widespread among Bible translators and Bible readers. At this point I would like to note that

2 Jacques Derrida, "Des tours de Babel," in *Difference in Translation* (ed. Joseph F. Graham; London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 165-249.

3 Chesterman, *Memes of Translation*, 21.

the device of literalness poses a serious ethical problem. We will deal with this issue further below.

The norms that govern the evaluation of Bible translations are derived from ideas people have about the activity of translation and about the perception of the nature of the biblical text itself. This does not mean that translators and readers of translations are fully aware of the norms they apply in their evaluation of translation. They apply a variety of norms that derive from ideas about what language is and how it works, as well as a wide range of theological and philosophical ideas. In this article, I will present the most important norms that should govern Bible translations. My approach towards translation is prescriptive since a purely descriptive approach cannot help translators of the Bible understand what the job of translation implies. I also will indicate the broader ethical challenges that Bible translators face when they translate the ancient biblical texts for audiences of our time.

Norms and values

It is impossible here to provide a complete and coherent set of norms that should guide Bible translation. I can only comment on a few key norms that are crucial for an ethical evaluation of Bible translation, but first, I should make a comment about the notions of values and norms. Values and norms are not objects or things; they are signs which point to qualities of actions. As signs, they are elements of symbolic systems. These symbolic systems are in fact clusters of signs having specific structures. So values and norms often appear in hierarchical scales in which certain values are higher in rank than others. One can speak about a highest good and about lesser goods. This implies the notion of gradualism. So values and norms relate to each other; they also relate to each other in binary structures. Values and norms are not absolute. This understanding may be further enhanced by the notion of contextuality. What is ethical in a particular context may not be at all acceptable in a different situation. Forcefully pushing aside people boarding a bus in order to get in first, for instance, is regarded as unethical in many societies, while pushing is an appropriate action in a rugby match.

It is helpful to distinguish between values and norms. Norms relate to values in such a manner that *norms are considered as concrete applications of values in specific situations*. The values of truth and honesty, for instance, are relevant in our perspective, but the formulation of norms in which these values are embedded helps us to see how these values can and should be applied in translation work.

I use the term “normative device” in this article. A normative device is a cluster of norms that refer to related values. I use this term for the sake of convenience, as it can be instrumental in applying the complexity of normative evaluation.

Chesterman formulates four basic normative devices, which he calls the relation norm, the accountability norm, the communication norm, and the service norm.⁴

4 Chesterman, *Memes of Translation*, 68-70.

1. **The relation norm:** A translator should act in such a way that an appropriate relation of relevant similarity is established and maintained between the source text and the target text.
2. **The accountability norm:** A translator should act in such a way that the demands of loyalty are appropriately met with regard to the original writer, the commissioner of the translation, the translator himself or herself, the prospective readership, and other relevant parties.
3. **The communication norm:** A translator should act in such a way as to optimize communication, as required by the situation, between all the parties involved.
4. **The service norm:** Translators should provide the service they have agreed to render to the commissioners of the project. They should translate in such a manner that readers can use the text for certain objectives. Skopos theorists attach great value to the specific service translators have to render in order to make the translated text usable for the purposes commissioners and readers have in mind for the text.⁵ The service norm is closely connected with the value of loyalty: Translators should be loyal to their clients.⁶

In this article I attempt to apply these norms to the specific task of Bible translation. I do not follow Chesterman closely, but take these norms as guiding principles for my reflection.

The relation norm

I begin with the relation norm as this norm is highly relevant for Bible translation. It relates to the classical norm of fidelity vis-à-vis the source text. It also brings the normative device of equivalence to our minds. I would like to formulate the relation norm as follows:

A translator ought to produce a fair representation of the source text and the intention of the author.

Translators should respect the Otherness and the Other of the text, and should not misrepresent the original author by putting words in his mouth he did not intend to say. When I speak about a fair representation, and not about *the only* fair or correct representation, I leave a lot of room to translators to express the original text in an appropriate form for their audience. Although the statement is normative, it should be viewed within the context of the entire translation exercise. The statement that the translator should reproduce exactly what is encoded in the source text presents a very clear-cut norm at first sight, but is in fact misleading. The idea that the text is a world in itself that has an independent existence in isolation from the intention of the author and the perception of the reader has been superseded in the light of modern communication science and linguistics. A text is an arrangement of signs or

⁵ C. Nord, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functional Approaches Explained* (Manchester: St. Jerome, 1997).

⁶ Andrew Chesterman, "From 'Is' to 'Ought': Translation Laws, Norms and Strategies," *Target* 5.1 (1993): 1-20.

pointers. Readers of a text interpret these signs from their own personal cognitive positions. Readers vary in their interpretation of identical texts, and it is obvious that they do not retrieve identical messages from a given text, but construe their own meaning from the text, a meaning which varies from one person to the other. The degree of variation depends on a range of textual and psychological factors.

A translator must focus on the communication process that took place between the author of the original text and the original audience, and that which takes place between translator and audience today. The text is the medium in the communication process, and not the absolute norm.

The intention of the original author

Translators should respect the intention of the original author. But what is meant by “the intention of the original author,” and how can we identify it? Biblical authorship is problematic in the sense that we know little about the original authors of biblical books. A good number of books are products not of a single author but of groups of scribes who worked and reworked the text according to the conventions of their epoch. It is true that we know little, in many cases not even the names of the authors, but we have an increasing knowledge of the culture of the authors. Cultural analysis, therefore, is crucial.

The intention of the author, the original text, and the perception of the original audience

A translator of a Pauline text begins the assignment as a reader of a text of Paul. Each translator is in the first instance a reader. As reader of an epistle of Paul—for instance, the epistle of Paul to the Colossians—he or she attempts to understand what Paul wanted to communicate through his writing to the Christians in the Hellenistic city of Colossae. The translator reads the letter, the medium of the communication, carefully, then analyzes the structure of the letter, and examines the rhetorical and symbolic features in order to understand the dynamics of the intended communication. Finally, the translator reconstructs the intention of the author. However, how the letter was received by the Christians in Colossae, what they understood, and what they misunderstood, and what their overall reaction was, we do not know. It is very difficult to reconstruct the perception of the original readers. If we had a letter written in response, we could go much farther, but up to now there is none available.

The normative device of equivalence

It is extremely difficult to reconstruct the original communication, and in many cases we have very little specific knowledge of the reaction of the recipients of the biblical writings. It is therefore difficult to deduce normative devices from the original communication. The idea that the reaction of the original audience to the biblical writing should be normative in the translation was an important element in the development of the translation theory of dynamic equivalence. In an article on the works and influence of Eugene Nida, Philip Stine quotes a number of

critics of the dynamic equivalence theory.⁷ Their criticisms focus on the concept of equivalence.

Pragmatic equivalence functions as the main norm in Nida's theory: the translator of a biblical text should aim for a translation that triggers a reaction similar to that of the original audience. If the reading of a modern translation of the letter to the Colossians produces a response equivalent to that of the Christians in Colossae in the first century A.D., the translation is good; if not, it is a poor translation.

We cannot, however, establish to what extent this norm is met. We simply cannot compare the response of the original audience with the response of the new audience. We know that the frames of reference of modern audiences and of the original audience are very different. People of the first century had a mind-set which differs considerably from the ones of most modern audiences in our era. It is impossible to present a survey of modern audiences in this respect, as there is a great variety in the global cultures of our times, but all these audiences differ considerably from the original audience. Many Christian audiences of our time read the letter of Paul as the word of God, while the Christians of Colossae read Paul's letter as the word of a man. This difference in audience perception makes it already extremely difficult to compare reactions of different audiences to Paul's letter, and it is not feasible to deduce normative devices from a reconstruction of the readers' response to the original message. Pragmatic equivalence, therefore, cannot serve as the main norm in translation.

Pragmatic equivalence was not the only norm that functioned in the theory of dynamic equivalence as described in *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (TAPOT) by Nida and Taber.⁸ Linguistic equivalence also played a major role. Translators were advised to look for the closest natural equivalent of the source text features in their translations. The overall primary concern, however, was to reproduce the meaning encoded in the source text.

As Mojola and Wendland point out, the underlying linguistic theory of the dynamic equivalence approach assumes that the translator has access to the pure and objective meaning of the source text. The logical consequence of this assumption is that the translator is bound to reproduce this meaning in the translation.⁹ I do not think that Nida and Taber really believed that translators could extract the full and objective meaning from a given text. They certainly assumed that a translator constructs meaning from the text and that the process of constructing meaning is influenced by a good number of factors. This is certainly implied in TAPOT, although not expressed very explicitly. Yet, Nida and Taber's approach was influenced by the general understanding of meaning and communication of

7 Philip C. Stine, "Eugene A. Nida: A Historical and Contemporary Assessment," *The Bible Translator* 55.4 (2004): 469-79.

8 Eugene Nida and Charles Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1969).

9 Aloo Mojola and Ernst Wendland, "Scripture Translation in the Era of Translation Studies," in *Bible Translation: Frames of Reference* (ed. Timothy Wilt; Manchester: St. Jerome, 2003), 8.

that period, and that approach appears nowadays less comprehensive than in the past.

Dynamic equivalence as presented by Nida and Taber is a prescriptive theory of translation. The norms for their prescriptive approach are not only derived from linguistic theory and communication science, they are also derived from theological positions. Nida and others believe that new readers of the ancient biblical texts should feel directly addressed by the biblical writer. This idea is an important theological principle which has influenced the praxis of Bible translation. Translations of the Bible should be no less than the original. The Bible is the word of God, and the reader of a translation should feel addressed by God himself. Direct address thus became a normative device. Translators had an obligation to present the texts in such a manner that the reader of the translation would feel directly addressed by the biblical author and through him by God, so that he or she would not feel excluded as an outsider. However, many biblical texts—the book of Psalms, for instance—are responsive texts in which human beings express their feelings and thoughts.

As a logical consequence of this principle, translators were urged to produce a fully comprehensible text. One could not imagine that the biblical author had expressed himself in incomprehensible language. The application of these principles led to translations that were characterized by many descriptive phrases, explanatory wordings, and explicitations. The biblical author of the book of Deuteronomy in these types of translations sounds as if he addressed people who had no experience of desert life. As Stine mentions in the above-cited article, not all Bible translators accept these principles. For many, translation is instead seen as “opening up someone else’s mail” and conveying the content to a third person. The reader of a translation is like someone who overhears a conversation between two other people, but is not directly addressed.

What Paul intended to say to the Christians in Colossae was addressed to *them*, and one cannot simply conclude that all he said to them has similar relevance for a modern audience. A translator should let Paul speak to his audience, and should not attempt to make him speak directly to the translator’s audience. This implies an important normative device.

The prescriptive approach of the dynamic equivalence concept needs to be revised in the light of the more recent understanding of translation as communication across cultures. The principle of equivalence, however, remains an important normative device. It should be perceived less as a hard norm and more as an ideal that is worth pursuing.

Ethical concerns with the pragmatic equivalence device

Translators who translate Psalm 137 for present-day audiences feel embarrassed by the barbarian cruelty that is expressed in that particular text. The text expresses very strong emotion. The psalmist intends to incite feelings of revenge and hatred in his listeners or readers. He addresses the Edomites, who indulged in joy when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, and hopes that a time will come for revenge on

the Edomites. The words he uses to express his feelings are repulsive: “Happy shall they be who take your little ones, and dash them against the rock” (v. 9 NRSV).

Translators who have to translate this text for present-day audiences do not feel comfortable with the content. They may not wish to make the same impact on their audience that the original author wanted to make. They may wish to create a certain distance from the text instead of making the meaning explicit and graphic. It is obvious that the device of pragmatic equivalence can not serve as the crucial norm here. We must conclude, therefore, that pragmatic equivalence is subject to ethical evaluation and needs to be seen in a wider context than just the linguistic environment.

How to define Bible translation as human activity

An ethics of Bible translation should relate to the very activity of Bible translating. We must look for a definition of Bible translation that can provide us with a framework for ethical evaluation. In the past, definitions of translation focused on text and meaning. The following example demonstrates this: *Translation is a transfer of meaning, encoded in a text written in a specific language, into another.*

This definition was in fact widely used in Bible translation circles.¹⁰ In line with this definition, translation was seen as decoding the source text and encoding the meaning into a new text. It sounds static now, and does not suffice to cover the entire process of translation since it leaves out two key elements: communication and worldview. It is important and practical to include these two key elements of translation in a definition of translation. For that reason, I suggest that Bible translation be defined simply as *communication of worldview segments of ancient authors to present-day audiences*. In defining Bible translation as *communication of ancient worldviews to present-day audiences*, I define the term “worldview” as a commitment to a set of beliefs regarding one’s self and the world. These beliefs or assumptions are largely unconscious, but they direct the individual’s perception and cognition.

The translator’s role is that of a mediator between cultures. A translator of the Bible has to mediate between the culture of the Bible, which is the culture of the ancient Near East, and the culture of the target audience. It is the task and responsibility of a translator to facilitate the communication between the present-day audience and the ancient authors of biblical text.

In this respect, I add a word of caution. Translators cannot be regarded as objective mediators between cultures. They share a large part of their culture as particular individuals with the culture of the audience they translate for. This is a fact, but we should keep in mind that people are only partly aware of the set of assumptions they have regarding self and world. The norms that govern the way of life a specific community has adopted are largely implicit, and people are not conscious of most norms and values they apply in life. Culture is like an iceberg; the largest part is not visible, but lies under the waters of consciousness.

¹⁰ Ernst-August Gutt, *Translation and Relevance* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 66-72.

Yet translators are assigned to mediate between cultures, and need, therefore, to make a special effort to analyze their own cultural concepts in order to increase their awareness of the frames of reference they themselves apply.¹¹

We cannot look at Bible translation as just a matter of translating texts from one language into another. We have to view Bible translation as communication of opinions, views, and attitudes between people of different cultures. We should therefore examine the dynamics of Bible translation projects carefully and determine what the ethical challenges are for all parties involved.¹²

The communication norm

Chesterman states that translators should optimize communication between the parties involved in the translation event. In my view this implies, first, that translators have to respect the culture of the author of the source text, even when the norms and values expressed by the original author clash with their own norms and values. Translators must be honest in their work, and apply the virtue of honesty in representing the intention of the original text in a consistent manner throughout their assignment. In the above, I have pointed only to a restricted number of implications of what I have termed a fair representation of the original text and the intention of the original author. The communication norm calls for authentic communication with the *Other*, the author of the source text. Translators need to be open to encounter the Other and Otherness, and this transparent openness towards the Other should govern their translation activity.

Quite often translators of biblical texts fail to communicate meaningfully with the author of biblical texts. They translate words, but do not communicate with their audience because they have not gained anything from the dialogue with the author of the text. An ethics of communication requires in all those cases an honest admission of failure. When they have failed to encounter the original author, translators should admit that fact in footnotes. This means that they have not been able to optimize the communication between the original author and the readership they translate for. In such cases, they should simply say that they do not understand the text, and that they therefore are not able to translate the text.

The norm of communication presents an ideal. The translator has a duty to facilitate optimal communication between the original author, the source text, and the readers of the translation. The translator should indicate possible obstacles in the communication, and warn the reader about potential misunderstanding and misconceptions. The communication norm is interconnected with the norm of accountability.

The accountability norm

I would like to use a specific case to illustrate the application of the norm of accountability. Present-day translators do not share large sections of the worldview

11 See Robert Bascom, "The Role of Culture in Translation," in Wilt, ed., *Bible Translation: Frames of Reference*, 81-111.

12 See, in particular, Wilt, "Translation and Communication," in Wilt, ed., *Bible Translation: Frames of Reference*, 27-80.

of ancient biblical writers. Worldviews of the twenty-first century differ considerably from those of the authors translators are assigned to translate. This reality creates a whole set of problems of accountability. For example, Gen 1.21 tells us that God created *tannînim* “sea monsters.” Many translators like to translate this word with the equivalent of “big fishes” as they have difficulty appreciating the author of the biblical text at this point. They have a problem with the idea that God created sea monsters, and for that reason, they prefer to domesticate the text by translating “big fishes.” When doing this, they do not respect the culture of the original author, since he surely believed in the existence of seven-headed sea serpents and the like. Some translators feel they cannot report in good faith that God created sea monsters, as they do not believe this is true. They also feel that their commissioners and readers will not be able to appreciate this. So there is a communication problem and a problem of accountability.

Translators are often tempted to provide an ambiguous, less specific rendering in this case, while in fact they should optimize the communication by being clear and specific. So there is a major problem with accountability. The translators feel that they are accountable to the church they translate for, but they also feel accountable for rendering faithfully what the source text says. In addition to that, they are accountable to their own concepts of truth. They cannot present in good faith a text as the word of God if they themselves believe that what the text says is not true.

Some time ago I worked with a translator who combined a belief in verbal inspiration of the Bible with a serious appreciation of modern science. He refused to render the Hebrew *tannînim* as “sea monsters.” When I pointed out that the rendering “big fishes” did not do justice to the source text, he proposed to translate the Hebrew term by “dinosaurs.” When I asked him how he would justify this rendering, he said that he was sure that dinosaurs had really existed and that he was convinced sea monsters never existed. “How we can report in good faith that God created beings that never existed?” he asked. In line with the norm of accountability, translators should be encouraged to add a footnote in cases like this. In these footnotes, the accountability problem should be addressed. Translators can state what the source text literally has, and how they and others interpret the text. This means that the translator cannot remain invisible in cases like this.

We should understand that in Bible translation we are dealing with clashes of cultures, and that in the above case, because of the cultural gap which the translator is unable to bridge, there is no authentic communication between him and the original author and between the translator and his readership. There is a danger that the translator does not really gain from the encounter with the ancient author and also the readers of the translation may miss the point of the story. They may miss the message the original author wants to communicate, namely, that Yahweh, the creator, is the sovereign master of the universe, and that even the dreaded powers of death and chaos are in his hands.

Translators of the Bible should respect the culture of the biblical authors, and it is therefore important that translators understand the cultural differences between their world and the world of the Bible.

What are the implications of publishing ancient biblical texts that reflect an ancient worldview and morality?

When we discuss Bible translation, we deal with the communication of culture. The goal of those who engage in Bible translation is obvious: they intend to communicate values, opinions, and views about God and humankind and about the universe expressed by the authors of the ancient texts.

Authors of biblical texts believed that the earth was a flat disk, set on pillars which stood in water. They had a passive anthropology; they thought that individuals were more object than subject, in no way architects of their own lives, but embedded in their kin and ethnic group, and foremost, products of supernatural powers and forces. They found slavery and male dominance in society natural situations which they did not question. Their knowledge of the physical world around them was limited in comparison with modern people, and their technology was of low impact.

Democratic capitalism and the continuous drive for production and consumption did not yet shape their lifestyle and general outlook on life. Most authors of writings of the Hebrew Bible adhered to a monolatrous and nationalistic theology in the context of a polytheistic worldview. Though they assumed the existence of many gods, they believed that their God, Yahweh, was the most powerful god.

The above brief sketch of the culture of the Bible calls the most significant differences between the ancient biblical culture and modern cultures to our minds. Biblical authors had a distinctly different worldview from people in modern times. Their empirical knowledge of the world around them was extremely limited and erroneous compared with the knowledge of people in our time. Also, the lifestyle and ethos were quite different. Modern people believe in the principles of democracy, but ancient people did not. Modern people capitalize on the equality of all people, while ancient people believed that inequality was a design of the Creator. Biblical authors had a different psychology from modern people; their minds worked differently.¹³

The translator of the Bible in our time and age is assigned to mediate between the cultural world of the Bible and the culture of the global village. The phenomenon of mediation is complex, as global culture can be divided into a great number of subcultures. A translator who is translating the Bible into an African language must mediate between the biblical culture and a specific (African) global culture. Such translators have to interpret the biblical culture in terms of the culture of the readers of their own ethnic group. The translators share a good deal of the culture of their ethnic group, but their culture is likely more influenced by modern and postmodern thought than the average reader of their group.

¹³ Krijn van der Jagt, *Anthropological Approaches to the Interpretation of the Bible* (UBS Monograph Series, No. 8; New York: United Bible Societies, 2002), 103-10.

The global culture of our present world is profoundly influenced by modernism and postmodernism, but it is at the same time diverse and segmented. Asian cultures have been modified by the dominant traits of Western cultures, but Asian cultures have also influenced Western cultures. Wide-scale cross-cultural contacts have created the cultural spectrum that we call global culture.

The global cultures of the world are both similar and diverse. In some areas of the global village, people think largely in magical terms, they devote much time and energy to rituals, and at the same time they use modern technology. In other parts of the world, people use the same technology, but spend hardly any time on rituals. The cultures of the global village are not unified. They are complex, diverse, and show a good deal of contradiction. Pure, unmixed cultures are an extremely rare commodity in our world. When we translate the Bible into the global cultures of our world, we attempt to communicate a worldview of a premodern book into a great variety of cultures that have been shaped to different degrees by modernist and postmodernist thought. This means that translators of the Bible have to bridge large cultural gaps in their translation practice.

Premodernism, modernism, and postmodernism

I use the term “modern” for the cultures of Western societies that emerged through the Renaissance and Enlightenment. The term “modernism” is used for a specific worldview that incorporates basic insights of enlightenment philosophy. Modernism developed when people began to examine the world with empirical methods in a systematic manner. When Copernicus, Galileo, and others observed that the earth was moving around the sun, they broke away from a worldview in which the earth was the center of the universe. Modernism stands for an optimistic worldview. It relies on the assumption that people can obtain objective knowledge through empirical research and observation, and are able to order the obtained knowledge through reason in such a manner that truth is established. Further, this worldview sees people as basically good, led by knowledge and truth. It is assumed in modernism that people apply their knowledge for the good of the whole world. Rationalism and empiricism are the leading thought patterns in the modernist worldview.

Modernism abolished the belief in authority and builds on humanistic values. Modernists do not subject themselves to the authority of leaders appointed by God, but believe they have a right to select the leaders they want. Democracy as it exists today is a fruit of modernism.

Postmodernism critiques the basic assumptions of modernism. It reflects a world that has no fixed boundaries. Recent research in physics suggests that time and space are endless, and this discovery has influenced thought about human life and the meaning of it, to a large extent. In a postmodern worldview, there is no room for objective truth, as it is assumed that all knowledge people obtain is constructed. Postmodernism argues that truth, beauty, and morality have no objective existence beyond how people write and talk about them.

In postmodern thought, the subject is not perceived as an entirely stable and singular unity. What someone reads in a given text today may be slightly different from what the same person reads tomorrow. Each individual has a different cognitive world. There is endless variety, and the myth of unity is an illusion. Also, the world is not one and is not on the way to becoming one. Postmodernists do not believe that history has a goal.

Modernism and postmodern thought have influenced linguistics and translation studies. When we see a word as a sign, and not as a container of meaning, we have incorporated postmodern thought. In “modern” translation studies, it is assumed that a translator has access to the objective meaning of the source text. This assumption is rejected by postmodern critique. We can therefore term Nida’s dynamic equivalence theory of translation as modern in a sense, and recent critique of this theory, as expressed in *Bible Translation: Frames of Reference*,¹⁴ as postmodern.

Both modernism and postmodernism have also influenced the perception of the nature of the biblical text. In premodern times, the Bible was largely perceived as a text inscribed by God himself. The biblical author as a historical figure was not in focus. The book of Exodus indicates that the Ten Commandments were inscribed by God on two stone tablets. In fact, the whole Bible was perceived as “(In)scripture.” In the Middle Ages, it was generally believed that all plants, animals, objects, and phenomena of nature were the bearers of God’s handwriting. When Adam began to create language, he just read the marks God had placed on each and every creature or thing. Words were one with things, originally. The Bible tells us that the original language of humankind was disturbed during the building of the tower of Babel. The Hebrew language was believed to be a survival of the lost original language in premodern times. Up to the seventeenth century, Christians believed that both nature and scripture were the secret books of God. These books were parallel creations. What God had written in nature he had also written in scripture.¹⁵

In premodern times, scholars could treat a particular biblical verse independently of the verses around it. Each verse was believed to have a cryptic message which could be deciphered by allegorical interpretation. So it was generally believed that the Old Testament was full of hidden references to Christ. The literary and historical context of biblical passages was not important for the exegesis and the interpretation of the text.

Up until the time of the Reformation, the Church believed that the Bible could only be read and interpreted with the help of the exhaustive corpus of scholastic commentaries. Lay people were not in a position to handle scripture. In modern times, the perception of the nature of the biblical text changed. From a secret handwriting of God, it changed to a historical text written by (inspired)

14 Wilt, ed., *Bible Translation: Frames of Reference*.

15 See the first chapters of the book by Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966) for an analysis of the concept of scripture in the sixteenth century.

human authors. This change developed gradually, but it altered the use of the Bible profoundly.

Premodern cultures are cultures that are not influenced by the thought patterns of modernism and postmodernism. It must be clear that there are no precise demarcations between the premodern, the modern, and the postmodern eras. In our time and age, almost all cultures are being influenced by modernist and post-modernist thought, though to different degrees.

Above, I sketched the basic outline of the cultures of the ancient Near East. These cultures were historically premodern. When translating biblical text for audiences of our time, we must be aware that we are attempting to translate specific worldviews of those ancient cultures for modern audiences with specific different worldviews. This summarizes the real challenge of Bible translation, a challenge that has significant ethical implications. Translating the Bible is translating a pre-modern worldview into the language of modernism and postmodernism.

The worldview of the translator

Worldviews are largely unconscious, and translators can never be entirely objective mediators between a foreign culture and the culture of the audiences they translate for. Yet the task of mediation is entrusted to them. I use the word *entrusted* on purpose, as this is precisely what is at stake. A more or less naïve reader of an ancient text in translation must trust the translator. The reader assumes that the translator understands *grosso modo* the culture of the ancient author and communicates to the reader what the original author wanted to communicate to the original audience.

The translation of the Bible leads to unavoidable cultural clashes. Translation is not an innocent exercise; it implies the confrontation of ideas, opinions, and ethical convictions.

The assumptions or beliefs of one's own worldview are seen as having an absolute validity; for the holder, they are true and real. Translators of the Bible find themselves in a different world from their own, and are constantly tempted to domesticate the foreign culture of the Bible to suit the conceptual and symbolic world of their own culture. Many translators of the Hebrew Bible have trouble with texts that reflect the primitive character of ancient Israelite religion. This is particularly true for texts that contain mythological motifs and anthropomorphic representations of Yahweh. Translators often tend to adapt these texts to more monotheistic and spiritual concepts of God. A well-known example of this is Psalm 82, where the Most High judges the gods in the heavenly court. He condemns them to death, as they failed to administer justice on earth. Many translators who translate for church audiences feel that this text contradicts the theology of the churches that have commissioned them to translate. They feel obliged to adapt the text as was done in quite a few older translations, where "gods" is translated as "judges," and then can be understood as human judges instead of divine beings.

The ethics of communication requires a Bible translator to respect the culture of the original author. This precept often leads to ethical dilemmas for translators when they and their audience believe that every place in the Bible confirms their

ethical and theological principles. This is simply not true. An ethics of Bible translation should place honesty above all other considerations. The norms of respect for the culture of the ancient author, and honesty in communicating that culture, should be consistently applied in the translation of the Bible. If translators feel the need to domesticate the text to suit the feelings and opinions of present-day audiences, they are obliged to notify the reader that they did so. If, for instance, a translator decides to let Paul use inclusive language, the reader should be notified in a footnote that inclusive language was not an issue for Paul, but that it has become an issue in present-day culture. By providing such a footnote, the translator is in line with the norm of accountability.

The service norm

We now come back to one of the norms Chesterman applies to evaluate translations: the service norm. This norm relates to how the commissioners of a translation want to use the translated text. The proposed use is subject to ethical scrutiny.

Chesterman speaks explicitly about the ethics of service as an important normative device.¹⁶ Translators agree to render a specific service to the readership they translate for. The service norm relates to the mutual obligations between the translator, readership, and commissioner. Translators render a service; they agree to translate a particular text for a particular audience and by doing that commit to the task of making that text accessible and usable for the purposes of the commissioner. They therefore have to collaborate with the commissioner and translate in such a manner that the text can be used for the goals the commissioner has set. Obviously major ethical problems can arise here.

Commissioners of Bible translations are often churches and Christian Bible translation organizations such as Bible Societies, each with their own specific culture, which differs in various areas from the biblical culture. Churches also have strong beliefs about the nature of the biblical texts, and specific opinions how the sensitive texts of the Bible should be translated. A major concern is the safeguarding of Christian doctrines. Many churches claim that their church doctrines are directly drawn from the biblical text. They do not like to emphasize the cultural gap between present-day theological opinions and the theological messages of ancient biblical authors. In order to create room for theological interpretation of ancient biblical texts, many church people favor a literal translation of the texts. Literalness in biblical translation, however, causes ethical concerns. Translators who attempt to translate the meaning of the biblical text according to its historical context face challenges. The service norm clashes with the relational and accountability norms.

The normative device of literalness

Many biblical texts are multi-interpretable, and translators should not close the door on possible interpretations of the texts they translate. In addition to that, biblical texts open up more than one single avenue for “ascriptive” and associative

¹⁶ Chesterman, “From ‘Is’ to ‘Ought’: Translation Laws, Norms and Strategies.”

reading. Again, a translation should not limit the reading process unduly by offering renderings that are too explicit.

The French philosopher Derrida advises the Bible translator to produce only interlinear translations. He feels that the reader should construct his or her meaning freely from the clues of the text. Free translations hinder this process, according to Derrida, and should therefore be avoided.¹⁷ In fact, Derrida argues for an invisible translator, but this phenomenon does not exist. Even an interlinear translation is an interpretation. The choice of equivalents for words is the result of interpretation. Translators cannot remain invisible; they interpret the text, construe meaning, and communicate this to their readers in one way or another.

How literal should a translation of the Bible be? The degree of required literalness depends on the genre of the specific text and on the objectives the commissioner has for the use of the texts. The translation of poetry and proverbs requires a higher degree of literalness than narrative texts, for instance.

When the commissioner of a translation project of the Bible intends to use the text for liturgical purposes, a higher degree of literalness is often required. The question is, however, whether all objectives for the use of the biblical text are ethically acceptable. This is a crucial point that needs further examination.

Bible translation and Bible use in ethical perspective

How far can translators go in accommodating the purposes of commissioners and readers? Are there limits to collaboration with target audiences? Are translators responsible for how readers use the translated texts of the Bible? All these questions have ethical bearings.

It is obvious that the ethics of service discussed above should be governed by the relation norm, the accountability norm, and the communication norm. Furthermore, professional norms for translation cannot be isolated from general ethics. Translation is just like any human activity; it is not only governed by in-house rules, but also subject to universally accepted norms of our present-day global culture. These norms are expressed in universal human rights and in the charter of the United Nations.

The New Testament call for universal love for all people is no longer an abstract ideal, but is now being translated in concrete declarations and implemented in action programs. It is now universally agreed that all people have equal rights and that every person should enjoy a basic freedom from oppression. How does Bible translation relate to these generally accepted ethical norms of our global culture? When we translate the Bible, do we contribute to the furthering of these ethical programs, or do we unwittingly enhance ancient primitive stands that affirm racism, ethnocentrism, nationalism, discrimination, and oppression? The Bible has been used to sanctify all kinds of evil, from apartheid to slavery, from discrimination against women to genocide. Translating certain parts of the Bible without note and comment therefore can be unethical. This is particularly the case when translators have a strong feeling that the text will not be used by readers to

17 Derrida, "Des tours de Babel."

further the well-being of all people but will be misused for contrary purposes. I would like to illustrate this with some examples.

We know that Bible readers in different cultural contexts connect with the great narratives of the Bible such as the Exodus and the deuteronomic narrative. In situations of oppression, a great variety of groups and peoples have identified with the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. People have seen in their own leader the Moses who was to lead them out of the Egypt of oppression. The biblical narrative inspires the oppressed and serves as a beacon of hope in difficult situations. In addition, people have connected, and still connect, with the deuteronomic narrative. This narrative focuses on the Promised Land and the wealth of the earth (Deut 28–30). Many groups, even those that have not experienced harsh oppression, have applied and still apply the promises of the deuteronomic narrative to themselves in concrete terms. They take the words Moses addressed to the people of Israel about the Promised Land and the inheritance of the wealth of the earth literally as promises to themselves. A fairly recent study of the ethnic community of the Bachama in Nigeria demonstrates that this narrative is still applied in the literal sense today.¹⁸ The leaders of the Bachama community developed a covenant ideology based on the Exodus and deuteronomic narrative in which the Bachama became God's chosen people.

Just as elsewhere, in Nigeria and in many other countries, certain preachers urge their followers to obey the laws of God as the book of Deuteronomy says, and take, if need be by force, the land and property of Islamic communities. Religious fanaticism based on the Bible has developed in recent years in various parts of middle and northern Nigeria as it has in the Middle East. A literal interpretation of the deuteronomic promises by Christian and Jewish readers enhances ethnocentrism, nationalism, greed, materialism, and even terrorism in various parts of the world. From the proclamation of a Prosperity Gospel in certain circles in the United States to the land claims of Jewish extremists in Israel, the deuteronomic narrative is indeed misused for unethical purposes. Jewish extremists bluntly state that the Lord himself gave the land of Israel to their ancestors in the distant past, and that they have, therefore, a God-given right to drive the Arab population out of the land of Israel.

In our times, the world attempts to unite against global terrorism, which is one of the greatest threats in the present-day world. It is well-known that Muslim, Jewish, and Christian terrorism is closely linked with a fundamentalist reading of those communities' holy books.

Translation of religious texts plays a prominent role in the creation of terrorist attitudes. Although the Qur'an is not officially translated into other languages, an enormous amount of oral translation and interpretation of Qur'an texts takes place in large parts of the world. Muslim religious leaders translate and interpret the Qur'an in colloquial Arabic in countries like Morocco and Egypt, in Farsi in the mosques of Iran, and in the languages of Indonesia on the many islands of that

¹⁸ Niels Kastfelt, ed., *Scriptural Politics: The Bible and the Koran as Political Models in the Middle East and Africa* (London: C. Hurst, 2003).

country. Translation of holy books is at the heart of a global ethical and political struggle. This reality poses ethical challenges to all who are engaged in Bible translation. The key question each translator of the Bible has to pose is whether his translation is in danger of being misinterpreted and misused.

Fundamentalism as a contemporary ideology

Since the catastrophe of September 11, 2001, literature on fundamentalist movements has attracted great attention. Our modern world has become painfully aware that there are large groups of people that have developed dangerous ideologies. Religious fundamentalism is not new in history, but the forms we encounter in our present time are culture-specific; they are truly movements of our time and age. They are partly reactions to the evils of the permissive and secularized world culture. The fundamentalist movements of our time are part of the culture of the global village, although these movements appear to be focused on the destruction of that culture. They emerged from modern society, and share a great deal of the knowledge and know-how that human beings have acquired over the centuries.

Fundamentalism is a problematic term; it is used with different meanings.¹⁹ I am using it here in an anthropological framework. In anthropology, fundamentalism refers to the ideology of a group of people who claim that their theology contains the absolute truth, and is directly revealed to them by God. This revelation is often believed to be written in holy scripture and interpreted through inspired agents in an authoritative manner. They also claim to have recipes to change our present world under a divine mandate into a totally and fundamentally different world. These groups strongly believe they are authorized to use any means, including violence, to further their noble cause, and they identify their own ethnic, national, or religious group as the appointed agent to implement the fundamental change. Exclusiveness stands in opposition to universalism in their views. They develop contempt and hatred against all who oppose or ignore their mission. Karen Armstrong characterizes their ideologies as theologies of anger and hatred.²⁰

Fundamentalist reading of holy writings

Fundamentalists read and interpret holy scripture through the lenses of their fundamentalist ideology. This is the case with Jewish, Muslim, and Christian fundamentalists. In this article, I am concerned with misinterpretation and misuse of the Bible. Translators of the Bible should have an understanding of the premises and dynamics of a fundamentalist reading of religious texts in order to be in a position to anticipate the perceptions of their audience. The following are the main principles of fundamentalist reading. I follow here some of the observations of

19 The word "fundamentalism" was born in early twentieth-century American Protestantism. The brothers Lyman and Milton Stewart, rich oil business men, financed a campaign to spread the fundamentals of Protestant religion by the free distribution of a multi-volume series called "The Fundamentals."

20 Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (New York: Ballantine, 2000).

Malise Ruthven, who wrote a helpful monograph on fundamentalism in which he also deals with fundamentalist reading of holy writings.²¹

1. Religious fundamentalism claims that its theology and ideology are directly deduced from a timeless holy book that originated in heaven and is not part of human culture. The Jewish belief that the Torah existed before the creation of the world and the concept of a heavenly Qur'an are representations of this basic assumption. Muslims further believe that the Qur'an contains all knowledge of the creation. They assume that the insights of modern natural science are already encoded in allegorical language in the Qur'an, and are in no way a fruit of human invention.

Also in Christian fundamentalist circles, people believe in a timeless holy writ. It is upheld that the Bible contains eternal truth and is from the beginning to the end the revealed word of God and does not contain error of any sort. Further, it is assumed that the Bible contains the secrets of the future of the world and that everything that will happen on earth is already predicted in the Bible. The Bible is not regarded as a human work, but as a divine holy writing.

2. Religious fundamentalists believe that the holy book contains only objective discourse, and does not present the expression of human subjects. They eliminate the human and cultural element, and by doing so, they ignore the variety of opinions, viewpoints, and emotion that are expressed in the biblical books.
3. The fundamentalist approach to the Bible does not recognize the Bible as literature. It denies that the biblical text contains expressions of the human imaginative capacity. It does not distinguish between literary structures and referential content. If, for instance, a biblical narrator introduces God in a narrative as a speaking character, it is assumed that these words come directly from God himself. In other words, they equate the text-world with the real world.
4. The fundamentalist reading of the Bible does not distinguish between mythical and rational discourse. Karen Armstrong points to this in her work on fundamentalism when she states that fundamentalists do not distinguish between mythos and logos.²² Fundamentalists read ancient mythological texts as if they were factual reports of historic events (logos) and ascribe absolute objectivity and truth to them. They also interpret these texts rationally and develop blueprints from them for action in modern times. Jewish extremists, for instance, use the mythic past of Israel as a model for today's political struggle. They read mythos as logos.

²¹ Malise Ruthven, *Fundamentalism: The Search for Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

²² Armstrong, *The Battle for God*.

5. A fundamentalist reading of the Bible downplays the cultural evolution that is reflected in the Bible itself. It does not clearly distinguish between earlier, more primitive texts and later, more culturally advanced texts. A good number of ethical stands of the past that became superseded in later times are still validated, simply because they are in the Bible.
6. Religious fundamentalism advocates a literal translation of the Bible. It does not accept the principles of functional equivalent translation. It prefers Bibles without notes and comments.

The necessity of note and comment in Bible translations

It was the philosophy of the Bible Societies for many years to publish biblical texts without note and comment. This ethical position has been abandoned in recent years. We are now aware that Bible translation is not just translating texts, but is part of a complex communication situation. We feel a need to consider the social, cultural, linguistic, and organizational frames that shape the translation and the perception of the translated texts.²³ This wider approach leads to important hermeneutical issues.

The translation and publication of scriptures is an ethically sensitive area of human activity. Bible translators and Bible publishers cannot wash their hands in innocence when scriptures are misused for unethical purposes. We are aware that specific groups of Christian fundamentalists read the Bible through the lens of a fundamentalist ideology and misuse the Bible for unethical purposes. Bible translators and publishers should anticipate misinterpretation and misuse, and add notes and comments that can help the reader to put the text into its historical context.

Let us take one example of a group of texts that need footnotes to counteract misuse (Lev 24.15, 16; 1 Kgs 21.13). All biblical texts that condemn blasphemy indicate that the only appropriate punishment for that sin is capital punishment. The Torah and the Qur'an speak the same language. Even the New Testament speaks about unpardonable sin, which is also blasphemy (Matt 12.32). In modern societies, blasphemy can only be punished, if it is punishable at all, by a small fine or a few weeks of detention, which is a far cry from capital punishment. A footnote should inform the reader that capital punishment in this case relates to concepts and values of a past culture, and that the texts do not have validity in our era to justify the execution of blasphemers.

We must conclude that in our time it has become a necessity to add notes and comments to biblical texts that reflect ethical positions that are no longer to be regarded as true and valuable.

Concluding comments

In this article, we have reflected on four major normative devices: (1) the relation norm, (2) the communication norm, (3) the accountability norm, and (4) the service norm. In the application of these normative devices, both honesty and

²³ See Wilt, "Translation and Communication."

truth emerge as prime values. The perception of truth is a fundamental issue in the complex communication situation of Bible translation at large. It is important to look carefully at the concept of truth in this perspective. What is truth? How is it defined? How do people perceive truth?

The term “truth” is used for the content of belief as well as for the result of perception. The underlying assumption of truth is human experience. What people experience as truth, they derive from perception, cognition, and human emotion. So people say, “I see this is true,” but also, “I believe this is true,” and also, “I feel this is true.” What people experience as truth is indeed truth to them, whatever others may say.

Truth is defined in accordance with the body of knowledge of reality that exists within a given culture. From biblical times until the time of Galileo, that is to say, well into the sixteenth century A.D., it was not accepted as truth that the earth was journeying around the sun. It was regarded as erroneous, even blasphemous and heretical.

Truth is not only related to knowledge, it is also related to beliefs, values, and opinions, which are culture-specific. When we ask the question whether a blasphemous person should be put to death, we ask whether it is true that a blasphemer must be killed. The Old Testament is clear about this (Lev 24.15, 16). However, in modern times people do not accept this rule, as they feel that the rule is not coherent with the set of beliefs and values they embrace. Modern people simply have different opinions about the value of human life, and the duty to safeguard the honor of God is not perceived as a higher value than the sanctity of human life anymore. A significant change in value-perception has taken place over the centuries. We should not forget that in the Middle Ages it was commonly accepted by the Church that blasphemers and heretics should be executed.

Present-day Bible readers belong to the global culture of our time. When reading the Bible, they are confronted with elements of a past worldview they cannot accept anymore as true. They encounter ethical systems that contain and condone injustice, according to their own cultural foundations. Bible reading implies cultural clashes.

Bible translators deal with highly sensitive texts. They handle truth, and they communicate with readers who expect to gain ultimate truth from reading biblical texts. Translators of the Bible should be aware that the texts they translate can inspire people in a positive and in a negative sense. They cannot remain invisible but must comment on the text in order to help the reader understand the contexts of the truth values that are implied in the texts.

The Bible is a historical document; it reflects the course of human cultural evolution. It is the historic source, *par excellence*, of widely accepted ethical principles that are embodied in the declaration of human rights, and adhered to, at least in principle, by all civilized nations of the earth. Many people are inspired by reading the Bible to engage in all kinds of humanistic work. Yet, many people use the same Bible to enhance an anti-humanistic ideology, by reading and interpreting the Bible along fundamentalist lines.

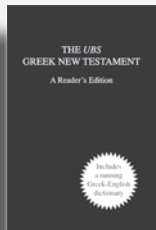
An ethics of Bible translation must be governed by honesty. Translators should be honest in representing the text, and should respect the otherness of the author whose work they translate. They should therefore present the text in the cultural context of the time it was written. Any translator who presents the text as containing absolute truth misleads the reader. Truth cannot be perceived as absolute; it is mediated within the cultural context of human communities. Bible translation therefore needs to be viewed in cultural perspective.

I would like to end with a prescriptive statement for Bible translators: *A Bible translator should at all times remain honest to his own culturally-shaped conceptions of truth and justice. He should also be honest with the Bible and never attempt to amend the biblical text in any manner to suit his own convictions or the convictions of his readers and commissioners.*

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