

FAITHFUL TRANSLATION IN AN AGE OF MULTIPLE MODERNITIES

DANIEL KERBER
danielpkerber@gmail.com

The author is a Translation Consultant for the Bible Society of Brazil and professor of New Testament at the Faculty of Theology of Uruguay, in Montevideo.

When we talk about “faithful translation” we are attributing value to the claim of faithfulness. We argue about the faithfulness of a translation precisely because we consider that a translation *ought to be faithful*. This demand of fidelity is based on the “word of God”¹ that is faithful, and ultimately on a faithful God.

1. Faithful God

The testimony of God’s fidelity is constant in the Scriptures. Since the very election of his people God is presented as the faithful God (*hā-’ēl hane’ēmān = theos pistos* LXX, Deut 7.9) and the God of truth (*’ēl ’ēmet*, Ps 31.6[5]). Facing his people’s infidelity, God remains faithful: “but I will not remove from him my steadfast love, or be false to my faithfulness” (*’ēmūnāh = alētheia* LXX, Ps 89.34[33]), and his faithfulness is forever:

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God,
who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith (*’ēmet = alētheia* LXX) forever. (Ps 146.5-6)

1 We need to clarify what we mean when we talk about the “word of God.” We could say that God’s word is “polyphonic,” and when we allude to the “word of God” we are speaking analogically. While referring to the living active communicative action of God, it also takes on a number of different meanings which need to be carefully considered and related among themselves. First of all, “the Word of God” is the eternal Son of God as mentioned in John 1.1. But this eternal Son became flesh (John 1.14) and so, Jesus Christ, the son of the virgin Mary is also the Word of God. God has spoken his word in the history of salvation, especially through the prophets. The word of God is preached by the apostles (1 Thess 2.13: “We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word, which is also at work in you believers”). The word of God is thus handed on, generation after generation, in the living tradition of the church. Finally, the word of God, attested and divinely inspired, is the sacred Scripture, the Old and New Testaments. To summarize: when the Scriptures speak about the “word of God,” it refers specially to the living active communicative action of God, and that communication passed on by his servants. When the church speaks about the “word of God,” its meaning is analogical, and thus it also refers to the Bible, which contains the divine communication. In this article, when we talk about the “word of God” as the object of translation, we are talking about the Scriptures.

The New Testament follows this tradition of faithfulness. Paul is categorical: “if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself” (2 Tim 2.13). He expresses the same idea in the letter to the Romans: “What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness (*pistis*) of God? By no means!” (Rom 3.3-4).

The book of Revelation identifies Jesus Christ, the speaker to the seven churches, with faithfulness itself: “The words of the Amen, the faithful (*pistos*) and true (*alēthinos*) witness, the origin of God’s creation” (Rev 3.14; cf. Bultmann 1964; 1968).

2. Faithful word of God

God’s truthfulness is ascribed mainly to his word. If God is faithful, so is his word. David says in his confession: “O Lord GOD, you are God, and your words are true (*’emet*), and you have promised this good thing to your servant” (2 Sam 7.28). Psalm 119 insists on the truthfulness of the divine word (vv. 43, 160) in his teachings (v. 142), his commandments (v. 151). The word of God is eternal, as well as his truthfulness:

The LORD exists forever;
your word is firmly fixed in heaven.
Your faithfulness endures to all generations;
you have established the earth, and it stands fast. (vv. 89-90)

In his prayer after the Last Supper, Jesus says, “Your word is truth” (John 17.17).

If God’s word is faithful, then God’s people should listen to it faithfully; that is why the psalmist asks:

Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long. (Ps 25.5)

The meaning of the word “faithful” is related to permanency. The very meaning of the stem *’mn* demonstrates this, as it includes both semantic nuances in the one stem (cf. Jepsen 1977). Jesus himself says, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Matt 24.35). The relationship between truthfulness and permanency suggests the absence of change, because there is a perception of opposition between that which remains and that which changes. This clue is also mentioned in Revelation in words which, although strictly referring to that book only, could be understood in a canonical approach as referring to the whole Scriptures:

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person’s share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. (Rev 22.18-19)

This faithful and permanent word of God is nevertheless given in human language, and thus, precisely in order to be *faithful*, it must be *constantly renewed* as long as language and the ways humans communicate change. Translation is this process of renovation and adaptation to changes in views of communication. Biblical translation may go back to biblical times. One of the first testimonies, from the sixth century B.C., is Neh 8.8: “they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.” Apparently people no longer understood the Hebrew and needed a translation into Aramaic, and that is what Ezra and the Levites were doing.

The difficulty of translating is mentioned by Ben Sira, in the introduction to his book:

You are invited therefore to read it with goodwill and attention, and to be indulgent in cases where, despite our diligent labor in translating, we may seem to have rendered some phrases imperfectly. For what was originally expressed in Hebrew does not have exactly the same meaning when translated into another language. Not only this book, but even the Law itself, the Prophecies, and the rest of the books differ not a little when read in the original. (Sirach, Prologue)

Despite this difficulty, the author goes on with his translation, and this translation is received by many traditions as the word of God.

3. Faithful translation

If we have no doubt about God’s faithfulness and the faithfulness–truth of his word received in the Scriptures, then when it comes to translation, everybody searches for a faithful translation. However, disputes begin when we try to *define* what a faithful translation is. This quest for faithfulness in translation, conscious of the difficulty of the very idea, is a constant all through Bible translation history. Rabbinic tradition took account of it:

That which is written in the singular, one does not present in the plural; what is plural, one does not present as singular. Rabbi Yehuda says: If one translates a verse according to its form [i.e., literally], he is a liar, and if one adds [to it], he is a blasphemer. (*Tosefta Megillah* 3.41)

This utterance of the *Tosefta*, taken literally, would hinder every translator. Yet the need for communication and transmission of the word of God went on, and new translations were made, from very periphrastic interpretations, such as the Talmud, that add traces of halakic and haggadic expansion, to almost word for word translations such as the Greek version of Aquila.

It should be obvious by now that “faithfulness” in translation is neither a simple concept to define nor an easy goal to achieve. Are we thus obligated to conclude that translators are traitors? I would prefer to say, *traduttore tramutatore* (or even better, *traspositore*). The translator is someone who, like it or not, *transforms* a text by *transferring* it from one linguistic-cultural

context to another. In such a process, it is inevitable that some things will be left behind and that others will be picked up along the way. (Silva 2003, 40)

Translation faithfulness and the doctrine of inspiration

Throughout the history of biblical interpretation, faithfulness to the word also depends on the concept of inspiration. The evolution of the idea of inspiration was slow and uneven. Behind the idea of inspiration is the faith that the Bible is not just the words of men, but the word of God. The purpose of the doctrine of inspiration is then to explain how these agencies came together. Origen was one of the first Christians to reflect on the idea. In his major work *First Principles (Peri Archon = PA)*, there is a chapter entitled “Divine Scripture Inspiration.”

The Holy Spirit “illuminated” (*to photizonti pneumati*) the inspired writer (*PA* 4,4; PG 11.372) with an action directed to the human mind, will and memory (*Contra Celsum*, 7,3-4; PG 11.1424-25). Nevertheless, for Origen the biblical prophets “voluntarily and consciously collaborated with the word that came to them” (*Hom. in Ezech.*, frag 6.11; PG 13,709), and the evangelists were able to express their own opinions. Indeed he distinguished between the word of revelation and the commentary on that word that comes from the human author of the Scriptures. (Collins 1991, 1026)

Augustine held that Scriptures were dictated to human authors by the Holy Spirit. He attributed a vital role to the human authors, who “use all those forms of expression which grammarians call by the Greek name tropes” (figures of speech, *Doctr. chr.* 3.29; PL 34,80).

The “dictatum” category applied to inspiration was used in both ancient and more recent periods in the history of biblical interpretation. As well as Augustine (*Enarrat. Ps.*, at Ps 62.1; PL 36,748), it is found in Jerome (“Paul’s letter to the Romans was dictated by the Holy Spirit” [*Epist.* 120.10; PL 22,997]). During the Reformation in the sixteenth century, dictation of the Scriptures by the Holy Spirit served to describe inspiration for both sides. “The reformers took over unquestionably and unreservedly the statement on the inspiration, and indeed verbal inspiration, of the Bible . . . even including the formula that God is the author of the Bible, and occasionally making use of the idea of a dictation through the Biblical writers” (Barth 1963, 520).

This idea of dictation leads to the model of “plenary verbal inspiration.” On the one hand, within Catholic tradition we can see Melchior Cano: “Everything great or small has been edited by the sacred authors at the dictation of the Holy Spirit” (*De locis theologicis* 2,17 [1563]). Not far removed is the Reformed *Formula Consensus Helvetica* (1675), which held that not only the words but also the very letters of the Scriptures were inspired.

The theory of plenary verbal inspiration has significant consequences in the practical order.

1. Every Scripture is the Word of God.
2. Since God is not false, every word in Scripture must be true.

3. The truth of the Bible is ultimately propositional.
4. The unity of the Bible bars any real contradictions among the biblical texts.
5. At least for some conservative Protestants, the Bible does not simply contain or bear witness to revelation; rather, the Bible itself is revelation.
(Collins 1991, 1028)

This category of inspiration as “dictation” has its consequences: Translation faithfulness will be understood as verbal faithfulness, because the words came out of God’s mouth. A review of this kind of approach to inspiration can be found in Trembath (1987). In the conclusion to chapter one, “Deductivist Theories of Biblical Inspiration,” the author summarizes the ideas of various scholars (including Charles Hodge, Benjamin B. Warfield, John W. Montgomery, and Edward J. Carnell):

Rather than beginning with the familiar and journeying to the unfamiliar, a genuinely inductive approach, these theorists begin with their understanding of the doctrine of God. This understanding is then joined with a particular anthropology which entails that all communication from God to persons be inerrant. The exemplar of this communication is variously portrayed as a prophet (Hodge), a secretary (Warfield), and a historian (Montgomery). Each of these ways assumes that inspiration is a concept according to which human beings are passive, whether as vehicles or as receivers. (Trembath 1987, 45)

Following this perspective of inspiration, a translation is faithful as far as it reproduces verbally the words contained in the Bible. Such a view of verbal inspiration often gives rise to very literal translations in which every change from a very close verbal correspondence can be seen as betraying the text.²

A recent and successful translator of Plato’s dialogues, R. E. Allen, defends his method in a manner reminiscent of arguments in favor of literal Bible translations:

Claims of fidelity presuppose that the underlying Greek text is fully understood, that is, interpreted, and that translations can be done in terms of this interpretation. Interpretive translations, like newspaper editorials, have their value; but they decide in advance issues on which students may reasonably differ and on which the English reader may be invited to make up his or her own mind. Some degree of interpretation, no doubt, is unavoidable, and a wholly neutral translation which preserved every ambiguity and all the overtones of connotation would require constant reference to the Greek in order to make sense of the English. Yet neutrality, no less than fidelity, remains an important value in translation. Let no man tell you what is in the text of Plato if you have means of finding out for yourself. (*The Dialogues of Plato*, vol I, New Haven, 1984, xxii)

² For this reason it is important for translation consultants to be aware of the translators’ perspective on inspiration since those who adhere to such views of plenary verbal inspiration will often be resistant to suggestions of change.

He goes on to argue that a literal approach should be part of the translation process (while acknowledging that “literalness requires interpretation after all”). It soon becomes clear, however, that *literalness* for this classical scholar means something a little different from what it means to many biblical students.

(Silva 2003, 40)

Considering the limits of this approach to inspiration and its consequences for translation, we can see the need for a deeper theological understanding of inspiration. This will enable us to better understand the importance of the human author not as a mere instrument, but as a genuine author, who uses all his capacities to imagine, choose literary forms, select vocabulary, and finally write down words, all under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

From Inspiration to Revelation

When we consider the doctrine of inspiration, it is important to approach it as subsidiary to the understanding of revelation. Biblical inspiration assumes that God makes himself known, revealing himself, that he communicates with the human family.

When one deals with Scripture one is not simply dealing with a textual object, but with a field of divine communicative action. Scripture is not merely “writing,” but rather a key instrument in the communicative economy of the triune God in which the Father is revealed, the Son reveals, and the Spirit is the agent of revelation’s perfection. So: whose God-talk counts, and why? The answer is: God’s, because he is the triune Lord. A properly theological account of Scripture begins from the premise that God is a communicative agent, able to use language for communicative purposes. (Vanhoozer 2003, 165)

The fundamental meaning of inspiration is that revelation has been reliably interpreted and preserved in the biblical texts. This goes beyond the idea of *verbal inspiration* as if the very words of the Bible were dictated by the Holy Spirit bypassing the personal characteristics and foibles of the writers; rather, biblical inspiration is *dynamic* in the broader sense that the writers faithfully recorded and interpreted the events of revelation without setting aside their human frailties and characteristics. (Wood 2005, 36)

Thus, when we consider the doctrine of revelation, the concept of faithfulness broadens, and we necessarily have to take into consideration the category of communication and all the variables that could influence this dynamic. We pass from a univocal perspective of faithfulness (“we have to be faithful to God and to his word,”) to a two-pole faithfulness: to God and his people, to whom he addressed his word. As God is faithful to the covenant he has made with his people which is revealed in his written word, then the one whose task is to read, interpret, understand, and translate the word of God will have to take into consideration not only God as author, but also the human author. In his communication, this human author is influenced by his cultural, historical, and social context, and within these influences writes to a community, characterized by diverse circumstances that

make communication a complex phenomenon. We do not mean by this that the only effort of the reader–interpreter–translator of the Bible is to understand the historical circumstances when communication took place, and to try to determine the meaning of the text in the moment of its production. This inquiry is essential, and the historical-critical method has made a huge improvement in this area. But it is not enough.

The second pole of the communicative relationship between God and people splits in two, because that people is today scattered into diverse places, languages, and cultural backgrounds. Yet our faith in revelation means the communication of God with his people today. This way, the quest for faithfulness will have to take into consideration the cultural diversity to which God today addresses his word. “We must never conclude that exegesis alone can exhaust the Spirit’s speaking to us through the text. Although the Spirit’s illocutionary act is to appropriate the text in its internal meaning, the Spirit appropriates the text with the goal of communicating to us in our situation” (Wellum 2004, 180).

Besides that, when we approach the idea of revelation, we are referring to an act of communication, so when we think about faithfulness, we must take into consideration not only the two poles of the communicative process, but the very fact of communication. In other words, a translation is faithful if it faithfully communicates what the word transmits, or what God wants to transmit through his word. The concepts of faithfulness and truthfulness reach a crisis point in postmodernity, but is it possible to define faithfulness or truthfulness in postmodernity, precisely when postmodernism itself evades every attempt of definition?

4. Truth and faithfulness in a context of postmodernity

“Postmodernism” is a term that has many connotations but is often found lacking in measurable definition. It is an extremely difficult philosophy to define or comprehend in a few easily understandable sentences. And that, in a sense, is what it aims for. Take the definition from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, for example:

[Postmodernism] can be described as a set of critical, strategic and rhetorical practices employing concepts such as difference, repetition, the trace, the simulacrum, and hyperreality to destabilize other concepts such as presence, identity, historical progress, epistemic certainty, and the univocity of meaning. (Aylesworth 2010)

To define postmodernism as using concepts to destabilize other concepts is one of the hallmarks of efforts to describe postmodernism. As Smith suggests, “Postmodernism can be understood as the erosion of confidence in the rational as sole guarantor and deliverer of truth, coupled with a deep suspicion of science—particularly modern science’s pretentious claims to an ultimate theory of everything” (Smith 2006b, 62).

Death of truth?

Postmodern thought has deeply influenced our culture. The hallmark of postmodern thought is the death of truth. Don Matzat notes, “The only absolute truth that exists in the postmodern mentality is that there is no such thing as absolute truth, and as far as the postmodern scholar is concerned, *that is absolutely true*” (Matzat 1997, 7).

It may be difficult to declare *the death of truth* but perhaps Middleton and Walsh were right when they said “Truth is stranger than it used to be.” But how do we get here? Truth was stable and permanent during modernity, and it was conceived as corresponding to reality. Paralleling this conception of a correspondence vision of truth is the assumption that the world operates according to universal laws. If this is so, how do we arrive at the *death of truth* or at least at *the strangeness of truth*, and what are the bases for knowledge, certainty, and truthfulness that mankind always looks for? When we look at truth in modernism we can see that

the Cartesian ideal of a system of absolute truth, with its attendant epistemological confidence, is not unique to modernity but dates back in the Western tradition (as Derrida saw) at least to Plato. It may be that what we can call “modernity” was an inherently unstable hybrid of realism and autonomy, a transitional way station between classical and medieval culture, with its submission to the given, and postmodernity, with its frank admission of human construction. (Middleton & Walsh 1995, 41)

In chapters one and four of *Theology as History and Hermeneutics: A Post-critical Conversation with Contemporary Theology* (2005), Laurence W. Wood traces the development from premodern to modern and postmodern concepts of truth. We will briefly review this development, in order to clarify postmodern perspectives of truth and from that point elaborate some elements that will help us to understand the implications for the idea of faithfulness and faithful translation.

The author examines the thought of Descartes and Kant and their influence on theology. Kant was the high point of Enlightenment thought. His dualistic view divided the world into phenomena (things that appear) and noumena (things as they really are) and led him to a skeptical conclusion about knowing the world beyond our five senses. Hence God and transcendent realities are impossible to know. The theological implication of this dualism is that God cannot be revealed in history because history is the domain of finite happenings in the phenomenal world.

Christian scholarship was deeply transformed by the rise of critical thought, especially as it was formalized in Kant’s philosophy. The only certainties that remained were the scientific facts of the world. Faith based on events of history was seen as too insecure for thoughtful people (Wood 2005, 3). Theologians who followed Kant’s philosophy developed what was called “liberal theology.” Its hallmark was that Jesus is not a divine person, but another human being with a high degree of God-consciousness, who is a model of faith for those who seek to follow his steps. Following these ideas, faith was at risk of being reduced to moral behavior.

Science and epistemology

Scientific knowledge plays a vital role in the development of epistemology. Modern science turned to empirical experimentation using mathematical and quantitative thinking in order to discover universal laws of nature. This new method of empiricism led to the idea of a mechanistic universe where everything was determined by an absolute law of natural causation, which allowed no variations or supernatural interference. This in turn led to a correspondence model of truth: truth is what corresponds to reality which is determined through empirical methods. An assertion is true, then, if it corresponds to—that is, if it represents accurately or describes correctly—a specific part of the world.

Postmodern science has now radically changed this belief in the idea of a mechanistic universe, as Wood explains:

With the rise of special and general theories of relativity and quantum mechanics at the beginning of the twentieth century, nature is now seen as including decisively subjective and unpredictable elements. Instead of the modernist divorce between subject and object, there is an interaction between thought and experience, and this interaction is the basis for penetrating into the intelligible depths of nature. (Wood 2005, 77)

Quantum theory has demonstrated that there is a decisive element of uncertainty functioning at the subatomic particle level of reality. This uncertainty principle has been the subject of many debates and has led some to reconsider the idea of objective rationality inherent in the universe. Whereas modern science based on Newtonian principles believed that things could be predicted with certainty, postmodern science has demonstrated that formal categories based on logical rules of thinking are not altogether applicable. There seems to be a dynamic element of openness and freedom about physical nature that eludes the physicist's ability to control and to predict its behavior with rational clarity. This subjective, interactive, relational, and open-ended characteristic of physical nature has become a paradigm for the postmodern age. If the modern world was obsessed with the need for certainty in epistemology, religion, and science, the postmodern world celebrates the absence of certainty and embraces the ambiguities of the world in all things.

A significant influence contributing to the rise of postmodernism was a book by Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). Kuhn challenged the notion of "hard facts," contending that scientific knowledge is actually a social development in which competing interpretations (scientific paradigms) confront each other based on unstable evidence. Kuhn's basic assumption was that objective truth and universal rationality do not exist. Rather, theories of science are developed through a series of paradigms that attempt to explain how things are. This work is widely considered a milestone in contemporary philosophy, mapping out a new thinking about the openness and subjectivity of truth (Wood 2005, 78).

Wood (2005, 78-86) then presents the thought of three philosophers: Richard Rorty, Michael Polanyi, and Jean-François Lyotard and their reflections about knowledge and truth. The following summarizes his presentation.

Richard Rorty: A critique of modernism

Rorty notes that modern philosophy drew a radical distinction between the mind's perception of things and things themselves. He has called for the "deconstruction" of this modern radicalization of the subject-object distinction and its representative theory of knowledge. This philosophy sees knowledge as conditioned by the historical contingencies of life.

In contrast to modern philosophy, historical contingency is viewed favorably as being the basis of one's life orientation instead of an historical concept of universal, abstract principles which transcend historical situations. In this sense, knowledge is historical and a "social phenomenon," not a result of a correspondence between "the knowing subject" and "reality." As a postmodern philosopher, Rorty (1979, 12) believes that "pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements . . . determine most of our philosophical convictions."

Rorty rejects the idea of truth as a correspondence between mind and objects by believing that it can transcend the polarity of subject and object. Rather, this unity is achieved by a feeling of collegiality in an inclusive community that respects difference and cultural variations.

Rorty defends himself against those who charge him with relativism and irrationalism, arguing that these charges are a result of "mindless defensive reflexes of the philosophical tradition" (Rorty 1979, 13) which is fixated on an epistemological dualism of subject and object. Rorty replies that "such charges have no weight." Why? Because they are based on an outdated modernist dualism of knower and known. He then calls for "the demise of foundational epistemology" (Rorty 1979, 315). In this, Rorty is not calling for an alternative discipline of thought to replace it. He calls for a new direction, and interprets this new direction as moving "from epistemology to hermeneutics."

Hermeneutics rejects the idea that knowledge is an accurate representation of facts existing independently of the knower. It aims at "continuing a conversation rather than at discovering truth."

Michael Polanyi: A postcritical philosophy

Polanyi also criticized the modernist view of scientific knowledge, which assumed that a knower could impersonally and from an emotionally detached point of view control and interpret reality explicitly and clearly. In contrast, he believed that in "every act of knowing there enters a tacit and passionate contribution of the person knowing what is being known" (Polanyi 1958, 312).

Knowing is a social event in the sense that everything one claims to know can be publicly discussed. It is thus not subjective arbitrariness. As opposed to the extreme dualism of Kant's critical philosophy, Polanyi emphasizes that knowing takes place in the context of a continuum. We shift from more or less tacit knowing to more or less explicit knowing every moment of our lives.

Kant assumed that phenomena could be clearly interpreted with rational certainty, whereas tacit knowing was downgraded to a mere logical inference. Kant failed to see the interactivity of these two poles, believing that the mind could

control the meaning of facts independent of personal feelings. For Polanyi, this is a myth of modernist epistemology. For what one feels emotionally, spiritually, and physically is a decisive component in the process of knowing. Therefore, the attainment of truth requires responsible, personal judgment. But truth is not the result of universal principles that can be used as algorithms. “Nothing that is said, written or printed, can ever mean anything in itself: for is only a person who utters something—or who listens to it or reads it—who can mean something by it” (Polanyi 1959, 22). Truth, for Polanyi, is a personal insight into the way things really are, whereas for Kuhn truth is a useful paradigm of the way things work until it no longer proves useful. With Rorty, truth is not “out there,” but rather, truth is a pragmatic assessment of what is useful personally and socially. Polanyi agrees that knowing is a personal process that inevitably involves metaphorical language as opposed to rationally precise descriptions.

Much has been written on the religious implications of Polanyi’s concept of tacit knowledge. The particularly attractive feature is that all knowing involves an element of faith and trust. Belief, commitment, and personal trust are dispositional presuppositions for all knowing.

Modern thought had trouble with the idea of metaphorical language, largely because of its concept of literalism and its view that truth is impersonal and controlled with absolute precision. Polanyi, along with postmodernists, has argued for a relational understanding of truth, emphasizing its personal and social dimensions.

Jean-François Lyotard: A critique of metanarrative

In 1979 Lyotard introduced the term “postmodern” to a broad range of scholars in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. He defined the main feature of postmodernism “as incredulity towards metanarratives.” By metanarratives he means the idea that there is a universal truth that can be communicated between “the sender and the addressee of a statement” that is intellectually binding for all rational minds. He refers to this modernist idea of rational communication as “the Enlightenment narrative.”

If modern thought deconstructed religious narratives as fable, postmodern thought is deconstructing the modern idea of metadiscourse as just another fable. Lyotard believed the process of reconstructing the idea of universal truth in a secular, non-religious way was completed by the end of the 1950s, and subsequently modernism is being deconstructed also as naïve and authoritarian. Postmodernism thus champions a plurality of narratives and viewpoints, none of which can claim to be absolute. His views of postmodernism do not in themselves have the negative consequences for religious faith that might seem to be obvious upon first reflection. On the contrary, Christian theology is not well-served by modernist epistemology.

5. Faithfulness in translation in the postmodern era

So, after this approach to postmodern concepts of knowledge and truth, what can we say about faithfulness? What can we say about faithful translation? I will try to pick up some points that seem to be relevant to give an answer to these questions. As we participate in an historical development, composed of both ruptures and bridges, some points can be traced back to modernity; others are more typically postmodern.

5.1 *Fidelity is relational*

In this relational dimension of fidelity, we must take into consideration the diverse parts of this relationship. We are talking about a translation of an inspired–revelatory text, the Bible. In this process of communication, there are (simplifying communication theories) three basic elements: the author, the text itself, and the reader. When we talk about the Bible as a text, both author and reader split in two: the **author** is not only the human author (with all the problems of human authorship that “tradition criticism” brought to light) but also the divine author, God himself. The **reader** is not just the historical reader when the text was produced. As we believe that God himself is communicating through his word, and God keeps on “talking,” the reader is also the contemporary believer in his culturally situated milieu. This reader is not so much the individual, but the believer as part of a community: “the Bible remains authoritative Scripture because it is the book of the church. And that is why a theological reading of Scripture must always take place in a communal setting. Our interpretation is governed by our ecclesiology” (Wellum 2004, 175).

So, when the translator seeks faithfulness, he must take into consideration all these components of the relationship. I do not need to go into the details of these aspects, but will offer some hints. Regarding the human author, translators and especially translation consultants must be acquainted with the social-religious-cultural background of the author/authors of the text. These aspects are not determinative but have a great influence on the meaning of the text. The more the team of translators becomes familiar with this background, the less eisegesis they will make. The text should be considered in all its complexity: original language, literary genre, biblical figures of speech that may not easily transfer to the target language, other Bible translations accessible to the translators, etc. It is vital, when approaching the text, to consider the literary unit as a whole, given the tendency of translators to translate verse by verse. And we must take not just the literary unit, or the book, as a whole, but the Bible as a whole. Because of the intertextuality of the entire Scripture, the text is related to other texts as they are part of the canon. Finally, there is the relation with the reader and his background and culture, historical and contemporary. And here, particularly with the contemporary reader, there is in fact a set of concentric circles: translators and consultant, correctors, readers, and community. There is not only a target language, but a language spoken by a real community of people. So faithful translation involves a dialogue with

the author, the text, and the readers, and all of these relations should be taken into consideration in order to improve the fidelity of translation.

5.2 Fidelity is participatory and self-committing

Postmodernism highlights the breakdown of the modern separation between “subject” and “object” in the process of knowing. So one cannot judge faithfulness “from outside.” It is only perceived when we take part in the corresponding process. Faithful translation is more something to share than to show. Therefore, as stated above, the wider the relational context within which the translation is made, the more people will accept it as a faithful translation. A translation of the Bible (a biblical translation) is not the task of just one translator but a joint effort of many translators. Consequently, people would feel the translation to be more faithful.

When we start a new translation, the starting point is not a “tabula rasa,” either with reference to the text (there is a long tradition of translations beginning with Hebrew→Greek texts) or with regard to the team of translators. The preconceptions people bring with them are not negative influences on the process. Belief, commitment, and personal trust are dispositional presuppositions for all knowing. “Only a Christian who stands in the service of his faith can understand Christian theology and only he can enter into the religious meaning of the Bible. Theology and the Bible together form the context of worship and must be understood in their bearing on it” (Polanyi 1959, 281).

5.3 Fidelity is historical

Translating is a task of approximation. Translators make an approximation to the meaning of the text from the source to the target language. But as Gadamer said, meaning is not something that is “in” the text, but emerges when the text is read or heard. Meaning appears from this “fusion of horizons,” it is a moment of dialogue when reader and text converse (Vanhooser 2003, 153), thus meaning is always historically conditioned by the reader’s horizon. Translations are always related to a place, a people, a culture, and a period of time.

In different traditions, there have been translations aspiring to a permanent ahistorical value; but they could not achieve their goal, because history moves on, and so do culture and language. Historical faithfulness includes the necessary changes translations have to undergo to accompany the course of time.

The risk of relativism

All these characteristics of postmodern truthfulness may lead to a relativistic conception. If fidelity is relational, then it is relative to relations. If it is participatory and self-committing, it depends on those who participate. If it is historical, then it is continuously changing. Relative, depending, changing—does all this mean relativism?

One of the primary concerns of moderns in regards to postmodern philosophy is the issue of objectivity.

Many see Derrida’s claim that everything must be interpreted and fear that interpretation is a wholly arbitrary endeavour, in which the reader is

lord. Because of these fears, deconstruction signals the impossibility of communication. Can we really know if anything is objectively true? (Wulpi 2010, 17-18)

This aspect of relativism is a real risk in a postmodern approach to truth and faithfulness, and so to Scripture translation. Middleton and Walsh put it well, in describing the postmodern condition of truth:

I turned from seeking a basis in objective truth, to considering what would fit with my subjective, cultural experience. I began by tasting and “trying on” different religious worldviews and practices, at the smorgasbord table of postmodernism—where a number of different belief systems are able to be presented and tolerated at once. (Middleton & Walsh 1995, 76-77)

What can we say about these risks? Is there no more place for objective truth and objective faithfulness? Translation has always been a risk, the risk of interpreting the text in its milieu and transposing it to the language of an established, contemporary population. The community making the translation should be aware of this risk, and try to get through it in the best possible way. The points we have just mentioned are of help, but there is another point that is always present but often unseen. It is the community itself, the broad and permanent community, beginning with God’s people among whom the Old Testament developed, and continuing with the new people of God, the church that received these writings and developed the New Testament. All this process is what we call tradition.

5.4 Fidelity involves tradition

Meaning and context

The quest for objectivity related to truth and faithfulness needs some observations, because, as Wulpi expresses it,

With the questioning of objectivity come accusations of relativism. The contextualization of our truth-claims is not a threat to their truth value—it only appears so, because we tend to implicitly think of the rational subject as separable from the interpretive context in which it finds itself. But we can find no context-less subject. (Wulpi 2010, 19)

If modern hermeneutics stressed the importance of asking about the author’s intention, a postmodern approach moves towards the text and the reader’s side of communication, and stresses more the content of the text and the reader’s context. The reader’s context is the tradition he is in.

“What is called ‘objective’ is in fact, determined by context—just a vast, very old one” (Smith 2006b, 120-21). It is our communities that fix contexts, and context which determines meaning. This is what we call “objective,” when in reality our meaning is determined by our context and worldviews. The importance of context, of community, when we deal with meaning comes from Gadamer’s reflections: for Gadamer, the grounds for understanding lie in “dialogue,” i.e., the search for agreement on some issue carried out in the trust that we can understand each other and the world. It is through such dialogue that intellectual traditions are formed and

advanced (cf. Wachterhauser 1994, 14). Gadamer rehabilitates tradition by arguing that prejudices are conditions of understanding: “Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition” (2002, 290).

Derrida also emphasizes strongly that there are important, legitimate determinations of context. In particular the context for understanding a text, thing or event is established by a community of interpreters who come to an agreement about what constitutes the true interpretation of that text, thing or event. Given the goals and purposes of a given community, it establishes a consensus regarding the rules that will govern good interpretation.

(Smith 2006b, 53)

The rehabilitation of tradition is also seen in the work of Thomas Kuhn, whose *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* made the scientific community rather than the scientific method the primary factor in his explanation of how science works.

Kuhn defines “normal science” in terms of the scientific community’s commitment to a stable “paradigm” that governs long periods of research. . . . Kuhn’s paradigms function much like foundation narratives whose authority stems from the fact that the process of professional education teaches scientists to respect the paradigms/classic texts and to continue the discussion about their interpretation (for example, research). . . . On Kuhn’s view, the history of science itself becomes a story of the Scripture (read “paradigm”) and tradition (read “scientific community”) relation. (Vanhoozer 2003, 154)

Context and tradition

When we deal with biblical hermeneutics, this context is a living one, i.e., the living tradition in which Scripture has been developing for centuries beginning from pre-biblical oral tradition (prophets, apostles, and others), passing through the process of textual fixation, and going on in the continuous preaching of the church.

This tradition is seen differently in different denominations within the church. The Catholic and Orthodox approaches have always received this tradition as the milieu in which the Bible can be read. The Reformed tradition historically posed the “sola Scriptura” claim mainly because of excesses within Roman traditions, but in recent times, reformed theology has begun to include tradition in its reflection for a sound theology. For Grenz and Franke (2001), the three sources of theology are Scripture, tradition, and culture. “Since the Spirit speaks through all three, we carefully listen for the voice of the Spirit who speaks through Scripture, in light of His speaking through the tradition of the church, and within the particularity of culture” (quoted in Wellum 2004, 182). Kevin Vanhoozer (2003) also explores the relation Scripture–Tradition in his penetrating article in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*.

Thus, understanding truth and faithfulness within this tradition, the threat of relativism seems to lose strength. It is not “my truth” or “your truth,” but truthfulness and faithfulness is a goal towards which we walk with others in an historical community, one that does not just begin now, but has been walking

together for centuries. And this common path provides lights that help us to take steps towards a truth we do not own, but which owns us.

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