
Book Review

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The Bible Translator

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Katharina Heyden and Henrike Manuwald, eds. *Übertragungen heiliger Texte in Judentum, Christentum und Islam*. Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie 75. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019. vi, 300 pp. ISBN: 978-3-16-156312-6, €69; eBook PDF ISBN: 978-3-16-156313-3, €69.

This volume brings together contributions from a conference held in Bern in 2015. All the essays deal with the various problems and prospects connected to the translation of sacred texts in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The contributions are written from an academic perspective, discussing problems on a predominantly theoretical level. However, the practical implications of the problems discussed are never far away.

In a general introduction, Heyden and Manuwald outline the contents of the volume. They describe its background, and discuss some of its general concepts. The first thing to note is the use of the word *Übertragungen* (“transmissions”), rather than *Übersetzungen* (“translations”). This is because the volume does not exclusively deal with translation proper; it also deals with intralingual translation, i.e., rewording in the same language, such as different forms of adaptations of the source text in the same language as the source text. The volume also covers intersemiotic translation, i.e., “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of nonverbal sign systems” (Roman Jakobson). This would include, for example, sacred text into art works or comics. Heyden and Manuwald also mention reinterpretations of already existing texts as a form of translation/transmission. Examples are those cases when the New Testament has incorporated material from the Hebrew Bible, or when the Qur’an has incorporated material from the Bible.

Heyden and Manuwald discuss the concept of equivalence, which they apparently find problematic. In religions in which the sacred texts are highly venerated, as in parts of Christianity but perhaps even more so in Islam, translators may never be able to place themselves on the same “level” as

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the source text. In such cases, equivalence can never be achieved. A *vertical* translation will instead be the result, as opposed to a *horizontal* translation. Heyden and Manuwald also discuss the very concept of *sacred texts* and what actually makes a text sacred, suggesting two criteria which need to be met: The text in question must have become *canonized* as well as *sacralized*. The latter is achieved by religious denominations using the texts *as* religious texts. Both canonization and sacralization are gradual processes, which means that the volume generally takes a sociological perspective on the sacredness of sacred texts, not regarding it as something inherent in the texts themselves.

The volume is arranged in four different sections: (1) On the transmissibility of sacred texts (*Zur Übertragbarkeit heiliger Texte*), (2) Transmission of sacred texts between literalness and exegesis (*Übertragungen heiliger Texte zwischen Wörtlichkeit und Exegese*), (3) Adjustments of sacred texts according to text-external norms (*Anpassung heiliger Texte an textexterne Normen*), and (4) Transmission and inspiration (*Übertragung und Inspiration*). The first section contains three contributions: Hanna Liss writes about Jewish translation techniques in light of the fact that Judaism does not have *one* sacred text: There are two Torahs, one written and one oral. Furthermore, for the rabbis, apparently the Hebrew *language* was considered sacred, rather than any text. Liss concludes that translation in a Jewish context is informed by two equally important notions: reading or hearing the sacred texts in a ritual circumstance (the “sound” of the text), and understanding its message (the “word” of the text).

Next, Martin Leutzsch discusses a number of taboos in the translation of Christian Bibles. A translator encounters such taboos when, for example, he or she is confronted with the task of retranslating the Bible into languages that for a long time have been dominated by “hegemonic” translations, such as the KJV in English or Martin Luther’s translation in German. Another example is when hegemonic translations are being revised, as has been the case several times with Luther’s translation. These problems should be well known to any Bible translator. Furthermore, Leutzsch points out the predominant place that biblical translations have held in Christianity since at least the Vulgate, to the extent that translations have often effectively *replaced* the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek source texts.

In the last contribution of the first section, Johanna Pink investigates two twentieth-century Indonesian Qur’an translations and the controversies they sparked, thus placing emphasis on various problems connected to the reception of translated sacred texts. Pink discusses these problems in terms of “boundary transgressions” (*Grenzüberschreitungen*), arguing that translating the Qur’an may indeed be understood as a form of vertical translation, since it entails a strong hierarchy between source text and translators/

receptors. Trying to overcome this hierarchy means that the translator risks committing a boundary transgression.

Whereas Pink discusses contemporary translations, the two contributions making up the second section discuss ancient translations. Christoph Kugelmeier focuses exclusively on the Septuagint, taking it as an illustration of the floating concept of source text when it comes to biblical translations. Thus, for example, when a translator of the New Testament translates its Septuagint references, what kind of text is it that the Septuagint constitutes? Surely it is already a translated text being quoted by the New Testament writers. In what sense, then, can we speak of it as a *source* text for a translator of the New Testament? And what is the canonical status of such texts?

In the next contribution, Ronny Vollandt writes about the Septuagint, the Targums, and medieval Arabic translations of the Hebrew Bible. The section about the Arabic translations makes for an especially fascinating read. Vollandt shows how these were heavily influenced by, and even adjusted to, the Islamic cultural field which was the context of the translations. One example is how, in the Pentateuch translation by Saadia Gaon (early tenth century), the Hebrew word *kohen* “priest” was translated as *imam*. Thus, the vocabulary of one sacred text was used to interpret the vocabulary of another sacred text.

The third section of the volume is dedicated to the intersection between sacred texts and text-external norms. Such norms are, for example, cultural, religious, and political. Katrin Kogman-Appel writes about Sephardic illustrations of Haggadah texts, thus a case of intersemiotic translation. She calls such illustrations a form of “annotating transmission” (*kommentierende Übertragung*). In other words, they constitute a kind of “retelling” of the source text. As a case study, Kogman-Appel looks into what clothes the biblical characters in the Haggadah illustrations are wearing, linking these to the clothing manners of the source cultures (such as early fourteenth-century eastern Europe)—an excellent example of text-external norms influencing the “translation.”

In the third section’s second contribution, Doroteha Salzer investigates children’s Bibles in Hebrew—an example of intralingual translation. Salzer shows how such children’s Bibles from the end of the eighteenth century were used to promote and strengthen Jewish culture and religion in Europe.

The volume’s fourth and final section also consists of two contributions: Karin Krause investigates Byzantine Gospel illustrations. She connects these to a larger Byzantine discourse on what constituted a sacred narrative, placing a special emphasis on the iconoclasm of the early eighth century. Connecting this to a discussion on translation theory, where she underlines how important the notion of *accuracy* has been when it comes to translating sacred texts, Krause finally argues against calling the Byzantine Gospel

illustrations “translations.” This is because, as she puts it, the Gospel illustrations “leave sacred words unsaid.”

Finally, drawing on Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytical concept of *transference*, Nora Schmidt makes an attempt to interpret the role that Moses plays in the Qur’an’s fifth surah. Moses symbolizes memory and revelation, and the point of Schmidt’s use of Freud is not to interpret this first and foremost in historical or exegetical terms, but as something that was used by the prophet Muhammad to create a new “monotheistic paradigm.” Although highly suggestive, this last contribution is the one that is perhaps most removed from any discussion of translation in its original or classic sense.

As in any volume of this kind, there are some duplications and reiterations among the contributions. Several of the contributions discuss problems of translation theory from the standpoint of an almost exclusively German research context (with recurring references to, for example, Werner Koller). In this perspective, a more thoroughly international orientation could have widened the scope of the volume and strengthened its relevance for research within the Translation Studies paradigm.

In sum, however, the volume makes for an interesting and thought-provoking read. The contributions are well written, and the idea to jointly discuss translations of the Christian Bible, the Hebrew Bible, and the Qur’an is rewarding, pointing out similarities as well as differences among different religions’ conceptions of sacred texts. In other words, the specific problems connected to translating the Hebrew Bible and the Qur’an will also be of interest in translating the Christian Bible or the New Testament. By engaging in questions on such central concepts as equivalence, sacred texts, and even translation, this volume has the potential of being a valuable resource for translators of the Bible.