

Thor Strandenæs

*Translation as Interpretation: The Problem**In Front of the Text*

It is a fact that readers of the Bible have always needed interpretation. The original readers needed interpretation in order to bring the subject matter in contact with their religious and cultural universe. The same goes for modern Bible readers. The extent to which such interpretation is necessary may vary. But pure knowledge of a language or the ability to read it has never been sufficient for understanding biblical texts, even in New Testament times. Thus, in Acts 8.30-31 Philip asks the Ethiopian official, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' and receives the answer, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?'¹ Here, the verb *ὀδηγέω* obviously refers to systematic biblical teaching or an exposition of the Old Testament texts with regard to their messianic message and their bearing on the person and work of Jesus. In this essay, however, I will not pursue the issue of interpretation or exposition of the biblical texts as such, but deal specifically with the relation of interpretation to translation in the preparation of Bible versions for modern readers.

There are many translators and theologians who have shown the extent to which translation both involves interpretation and is itself, to a certain degree, also to be regarded as interpretation. While dealing with the question of how to translate the divine names David Cunningham has pointed out that: 'to translate is to interpret, and one never translates without remainder. There must be multiple names for God, for there are many

* This is a revised and enlarged edition of my contribution in seminar group 4 on hermeneutical problems. I am thankful for the constructive critique and suggestions received there.

1. Likewise Jesus expounds the Old Testament scriptures to the Emmaus walkers, *Lk. 24.27-28*.

languages—among which there can never be exact replication, but always interpretation.²

Thus interpretation is involved in translation. And rather than challenging the title of this chapter, I shall presuppose its truth and proceed to ask: what does it *imply* that translation is regarded as interpretation?

What Kind of Translation?

Before proceeding further it is necessary to determine on which kind of translation we should focus. As Sjölander has observed, the time has probably passed for ever when one version alone will entirely dominate the scene, and the existent multiplicity of versions has its advantages as it enables readers to choose versions which suit their ability and stylistic tastes.³

Some purposes may be combined in one version, others not.⁴ If one settles for a linguistic translation, this excludes a cultural-historical one. The former aims at bringing the reader of today back to the ancient texts, making him or her understand what they meant to their contemporary readers. The latter aims at answering the question: what meaning do these texts have in the different cultural contexts in which people live today? Although both purposes meet valid needs it is advisable to take as our point of departure that the mainstream version(s) must be linguistic translation(s), rather than cultural-historical. There are at least three important reasons for this. First, if ordinary Bible readers who are not trained in Greek or Hebrew are to discuss issues in the Bible with people belonging to other linguistic groups or faiths, they must as far as possible be able to turn to versions representing similar or identical attitudes to translation. Otherwise a dialogue might soon be impossible. This has some analogy with Origen's compilation of *Hexapla* for the purpose of fruitful discussion of matters of faith in the Old Testament with Jewish rabbis.⁵ Second,

the translation must present a text which is not a historical falsification making Bible readers believe matters to be different, better or worse than that expressed in the originals. Third, the translation must contribute to preserving continuity in the reception history of texts, between modern readers and readers in the past. After all, Scripture is a religious, historical and culturally relevant document for both past and modern times.⁶

With a linguistic translation in mind, what will be the sense of 'interpretation'? It is true that 'exegesis' and 'hermeneutics' are used almost indistinguishably by some writers and may both be included in the term 'interpretation'. In a linguistic translation, however, interpretation is used in its sense of historical-linguistic exegesis. This distinguishes it from hermeneutics, which must be reserved for the cultural-historical interpretation, a task which belongs to the teacher, preacher, philosopher or sociologist in their attempt to bridge the historical and cultural gap between modern and ancient readers, when asking what is the meaning or relevance of these documents to the lives of modern people. I am not in any way suggesting that interpretation in the first sense is a neutral process, free from ideological or theological bias, and will deal with this aspect shortly

In the Text and behind the Text?

First of all, the process of translating obviously involves coming to grips with the meaning of the originals. Before one translates a historical document one must establish—as far as possible—the meaning it carried for the original readers. Translators must therefore possess sufficient knowledge of the language of the original text as well as the culture in which it was communicated, including such socio-political, religious and cultural factors as are relevant to deciphering its meaning. When establishing the

read and understand Hebrew, needed proof to meet accusations that their Scripture quotations were not contained in the original Hebrew text.

6. Its religious, historical and cultural relevance is demonstrated in the presentation by Torf Fornberg in the previous article in this volume.

7. In his instructive book *Contextual Bible Study* (Pieternaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1993), p. 24, Gerald West distinguishes between three modes of reading the Bible critically: 1) reading behind the text—focusing on the historical and sociological context; 2) reading the text itself—focusing on the literary and narrative context; and 3) reading in front of the text—focusing on the major metaphors, themes and symbols that are projected by the text. The first two modes are oriented toward the past, the times contemporary to the composition of the biblical texts, and represent the historical-exegetical approach. The third mode focuses on present times and readers and

2. D.S. Cunningham, 'On Translating the Divine Name', *JS* 56 (1995), pp. 415-40 (426).

3. P. Sjölander, 'Some Aspects of Style in Twentieth-century English Bible Translation: One-man versions of Mark and the Psalms' (Doctoral dissertation; University of Umeå, 1979), p. 180.

4. W.L. Wonderly, *Bible Translations for Popular Use* (Helps for Translators, 7; London: United Bible Societies, 1968), pp. 28-31, has listed factors that affect different types of translations and shown the relation between linguistic situations and types of translation.

5. This 95 volume work was made to meet the need of Christians who, unable to

historical meaning of texts interpretation therefore plays a necessary part of the process. Quite often interpretation involves choosing between two or more possible referential meanings in the original text. A classic example is the possible ways of rendering ἐν τῷ ὑμῶν in Lk. 17.21: 'within you' or 'in the midst of you'.⁸ In some languages a choice is necessary which is not called for in others. Such choices in translation may often express different schools of New Testament interpretation.

In the Authorized Version of 1611 (AV), the English Revised Version of 1881 (RV) (as well as The American Standard [edition of the English revised] Version of 1901 [ASV], the rendering 'the kingdom of God is within you' reflects a non-eschatological sense. The kingdom of God, understood individually as growing and developing from within each person, fits the tenets of modern liberal theology as well as a more mystic understanding which was preferred in medieval times until well beyond the Reformation.

In the Revised Standard Version (1946 and 2nd edn. 1971, RSV), the New English Bible (1961 and 2nd edn. 1970, NEB) *et alii*, 'the kingdom of God is among you' has been used, a translation that is open to both a present and future meaning. Here an eschatological dimension has been introduced.

The different choices show that theological orientations or beliefs bear on the choices which translators make. Robert P. Carroll reflects this point well when he states that Bible translation... is an attempt to provide as accurate a translation as possible, *within the constraints set by the prevailing ideology of the group translating and publishing the Bible*.⁹ Carroll goes on to say that the cultural and ideological biases of the old Bible translations are more easily detectable, since they appear as notes and annotations to the text. But a translation without accompanying notes can be a very misleading document, since it appears to be neutral. Modern translations also carry the biases of the translators. It is therefore necessary that readers—and translators—should be aware that any act of translation represents but *one* interpretation of Scripture. In some modern versions

8. The former can be found in the Authorized Version, the Revised Version, the New International Version and the Good News Bible; the latter in the Revised Standard Version, the Jerusalem Bible, likewise in the Norwegian Bible Society Bibelen (1978 edition: 'iblant dere').

9. R.P. Carroll, 'Cultural Encroachment and Bible Translations: Observations on Elements of Violence, Race and Class in the Production of Bibles in Translation', *Journal of Bible and Theology*, 1997, 20, 57-74.

this awareness has led the translators/publishers to include a preface wherein the guiding principles are made known. Two examples of this in English are the prefaces to the New International Version (NIV) and Today's English Version (TEV). But the discussions which these versions have caused show that the prefaces to each of them could have contained even more relevant information. Each group of translators therefore followed up with such information later.¹⁰ This shows how important it is that principles which guide a translation are spelled out and known to its readers.

Second, interpretation also involves choosing between several possible ways of rendering into the receptor language(s), as Cunningham stated at the beginning of this article. Even when taking for granted the basic principle of de Waard and Nida, *that translating means translating meaning*,¹¹ translation is a process which involves deciding between multiple possible choices in the receptor language(s). Since each language has its own genius,¹² the kind and number of choices which must be made varies from one receptor language to another. In languages such as Shona, Eas Nyanja, Yao, Lomwe and Marathi, a term that covers both 'within' and 'among' is recorded for Greek ἐντός.¹³ In English as well as other languages, however, this is not the case, and a choice between the two must be made when translating, as with the ἐν τῷ ὑμῶν in Lk 17.21. Thus, the translators must be as familiar with the cultures and languages of the original texts as with those of the receptor groups.

In the very act of translating, translators are aware that the number of choices may not, after all, be that many, since words and clusters of words are translated in a specific literary context. As stated by Ernst R. Wendland.

One finds that words used in their primary sense in the Scriptures, i.e., that meaning which is the most relevant culturally and which collocates with the largest and most diverse group of items, usually present little problem in the process of message transfer, except in cases where that particular meaning

10. *Questions and Answers about the New Translation*. (New York: International Bible Society, [no date]), and E.A. Nida, *Good News for Modern Man* (Waco, TX: Word Books 1977).

11. J. de Waard and E.A. Nida, *From One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1986), pp. 60-77.

12. E.A. Nida and C.R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (UBS Helps for Translators; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974), pp. 3-5.

13. J. Reiling and J.L. Swellengrebel, *A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of*

or sense is unknown in the R[ecceptor]_[language] environment. It is the secondary senses and extended (including nonliteral) usages which cause special difficulty due to the inevitable incompleteness of lexical equivalence between languages.¹⁴

I shall return later to some of the challenges which such secondary senses and extended usages represent for translators.

Interpreting before Translating

When discussing translation theoretically it is tempting to presume that translation precedes interpretation. After all, translators should struggle with the texts themselves, not study them through filters provided by exegetes and commentators. When engaging in actual translation work, however, one soon discovers that translating is an involved process in which interpretation plays an important role. After all, the translators must be as certain as possible that they have grasped the intended meaning of the author of a text or of the participating subjects of a discourse. This can only be done adequately by means of commentaries which shed light on linguistic, historical, religious and other sociocultural aspects of the texts.¹⁵

E.R. Hope has demonstrated how textual analysis is an integral part of the translation process. In his analysis of the book of Jonah he points out how the study of pragmatics has made it possible to be much more objective when establishing the intended meaning of the biblical author than often assumed.¹⁶ For the translator, as well as the exegete, it is important to be able to describe adequately the presuppositions derived from the total culture and belief system of the author, or those of the participating subjects of the discourse. More important still is the ability to recognise their influence in the interpretation of texts. Another kind of presuppositions is also mentioned by E.R. Hope, namely, those which arise from the discourse itself: 'Each individual speech act becomes part of the context of the subsequent set of sentences, and influences the interpretation of those sentences by creating additional presuppositions'.¹⁷

14. E.R. Wendland, *The Cultural Factor in Bible Translation* (UBS Monograph Series, 2; London: United Bible Societies, 1987), p. 57.

15. Some valuable assistance for Bible translators have been provided by the United Bible Societies in the *Helps for Translators Series* which includes *Technical Helps, Handbooks and Guides* to each of the scriptural books.

16. E.R. Hope, 'Pragmatics, Exegesis and Translation', in P.E. Stine (ed.), *Issues in Bible Translation* (UBS Monograph Series, 3; London: United Bible Societies, 1988), pp. 113-28 (113, 117-18).

This not only demonstrates how closely connected interpretation is with translation. It shows the importance as well of understanding a Scriptural portion as a whole before proceeding to the act of translating it. For that purpose interpretation is necessary. As deWaard & Nida said:

...a translation should faithfully reflect what to whom under what circumstances and for what purpose and should be in a form of the receptor language which does not distort the content or misrepresent the rhetorical impact or appeal...¹⁸

Another effect which a thorough interpretation has on translation is that awareness it creates in the translators for searching carefully such semantic structures in the receptor language as may adequately render the meaning of the originals. Thus interpretation both facilitates a better understanding of the originals and paves the way for better communication in the receptor language.

In the following I shall give three examples from the New Testament of how translators may be tempted to tamper with the texts. All are concerned with the problem of so-called *corrective translation* and demonstrate how important it is to maintain the distinction between interpretation in its sense of exegesis or analysis and interpretation in the sense of hermeneutics.

Three Examples of Corrective Translation

Male Dominant View of History and Events in the New Testament

The first example concerns the problem of a male dominant view of history and events or, to put it in other words, whether ridding the New Testament text of a male dominant view of history and events is justified in translation. It is a fact that in many texts a male point of view is taken. In the New Testament letters the addressees are the *hoi adelphoi*, 'the brothers', and God is addressed as 'father'. Some have insisted on introducing so-called inclusive language solutions, replacing the former with 'brothers and sisters' and the latter with 'father and mother'.¹⁹ But this means introducing cultural anachronisms and contextual distortions, both of which are to be avoided if one is to be faithful to the sense of the

18. DeWaard and Nida, *From One Language to Another*, p. 40.

19. DeWaard and Nida have rightly pointed out that to translate the latter 'as both "father and mother" is to create a bisexual God, not a sexually neutral God' (*From One Language to Another*, p. 40).

originals. Although one may take for granted that the early church of Philippi and Thessaloniki included women and not only men, 1 Thessalonians constantly addresses the 'brothers' (e.g. 2.1, 17; 4.1, 13).²⁰ In Philippi Paul and his fellow travellers, having been released from prison, went to Lydia's house, where they met 'the brothers' (Acts 16.40).²¹ This obviously reflects the contemporary social customs: the male members of society were the public figures and official receivers of correspondence. Moreover, by anachronistically replacing 'father' with 'father and mother' one forgets that religious language is highly figurative and rich in metaphors and that the word 'father' itself carries metaphorical meaning, a meaning it must maintain in the context in order not to create distortion of meaning in the translated text. Whether or not 'father' carries the right associative meaning to a reader who has herself/himself been mentally or physically abused by her/his father, or is thoroughly disappointed by him, must be clarified in a consequent hermeneutical process. As de Waard and Nida sum up: 'In addition to letting the Scriptures speak for themselves, it is essential to accurately reflect the cultural contexts of biblical times, whether ideological, sociological, or ecological'.²²

Oppressive Political Tendencies in the New Testament

The second example concerns oppressive political tendencies, or rather whether one is justified in making use of the New Testament translation for the purpose of political oppression.

An example of this is the translation of portions of Scripture prepared by missionaries for the Panare Indians of the Venezuelan interior, where *hoi Ioudaioi* was translated by 'the Panare', a totally anachronistic choice.²³ The Panare Indians were thereby made personally responsible for the killing of Jesus, giving them 'the guilt for an act utterly unconnected with

20. The reference to 'all the believers' in 1 Thess. 5.26 demonstrates that the letter itself makes conscious distinctions. In other of his letters, the apostle Paul sends specific greetings to female members of the congregation, e.g., in Col. 4.15 and Rom. 16.3-15.

21. For a study of *adelphoi* and its context in 1 Thessalonians, see B. Johansen, *To All the Brethren: A Text-Linguistic and Rhetorical Approach to 1. Thessalonians* (ConBNT, 16; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1987).

22. De Waard and E.A. Nida, *From One Language to Another*, p. 24.

23. N. Lewis, *The Missionaries: God against the Indians* (New York: Penguin, 1990), pp. 209-210; cf. N. Lewis, *Unreasonable Behaviour: An Autobiography* (London: Vintage, 1997), no. 107, 201.

them'.²⁴ This kind of diachronic translation, albeit practised by some biblical exposition and preaching, is a falsification when it comes to rendering historical documents.²⁵ At the same time this is an example of how people in power, in this case some missionaries, are able to use the influence to manipulate and change the message of a version so that stigmatizes an identified group. In recent times the history of apartheid in Africa has demonstrated how detrimental such an attitude is in general; well as with regard to instances of translation. Thus, translation must show accountability with regard to historical and sociocultural matters in the texts.

Arousing, Maintaining, Furthering or Preventing Anti-Semitism in Translation?

The third example concerns the problem of inherent anti-Semitism in New Testament texts, or rather whether ridding the New Testament text of supposed anti-Semitic tendencies is permissible in a translation.

One of the issues that has been encountered in dialogues between Jews and Christians is how the New Testament contributes to anti-Semitic feelings and movements in churches and society. If a translator wishes to lessen the degree to which the texts arouse anti-Semitic feelings, the danger of corrective translation occurs. In a provocative study Tina Pippin has pointed out some of the problems encountered in rendering the 71 references to *Ioudaioi* in the Gospel of John.²⁶

- 1 By keeping the literal meaning 'the Jews', one perpetuates the hateful polemic.
- 2 By referring 'to Judeans or Jewish religious authorities, one dilute the force of the ethnic verbal warfare'—a warfare resulting in 'so much more than a first-century dispute'.
- 3 By translating *hoi Ioudaioi* as 'Judahites' or 'the religious authorities'—depending on the context—one covers for the text.
- 4 By keeping [the Jews] surrounded by brackets as translation, the difficulties, context and history of text must be explained by glosses; in accompanying notes (in the margins or between the lines).

24. Carroll, 'Cultural Encroachment', p. 45.

25. As remarked by Carroll ('Cultural Encroachment', p. 46), they were only following the customary missionary practice of making their audience personally responsible for the death of Christ.

26. T. Pippin, "'For Fear of the Jews': Lying and Truth Telling in Translating the Gospel of John', *Journal of Theological Studies*, 51 (2002), pp. 61-87, 700.

Among the four options, Pippin prefers the fourth, but does not leave the issue with this, stating that:

Any of these choices is vague and problematic, the cultural context of John's gospel is indeterminate, and 'equivalent' meanings in English are bound up in a dangerous and violent memory. I want to expose that memory and raise awareness about the ethical issues and stakes.²⁷

She therefore approves of the basic principle adopted at the Stony Point consultation, 'that to best combat anti-semitism, one must interpret, not just translate or substitute'.²⁸ Basically, however, Pippin thinks that the very act of translating John 8 itself is a betrayal of the Jews and that the translator commits a crime in the very act of translating it, saying: 'The root of the problem of anti-jewishness is in the text, in the mouth of Jesus, and in Christianity itself... It is the responsibility of translators and readers to transform this history, this gospel message.'²⁹ Thus, she opts for a principle of corrective translation.

It should be stated here that Pippin in her argumentation is uncritically dependent on the controversial thesis of Rosemary Radford Ruether, namely that the New Testament is anti-Judaic and therefore anti-Semitic.³⁰ Truly, throughout history individual texts or the entire New Testament have been defined by some readers as anti-Judaic or even anti-Semitic.³¹ However, in his comprehensive analysis, António Barbosa da Silva has demonstrated that Ruether's thesis is only partly true. His conclusion is that the New Testament is anti-Judaic *only* in the senses described as follows:³²

27. Pippin 'For Fear of the Jews', p. 93.

28. *Bible Translation Utilization Committee*, 1993.3, quoted by Pippin, "For Fear of the Jews", p. 93.

29. Pippin, "For Fear of the Jews", p. 94.

30. R. Radford Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (A Crossroad Book; New York: The Seabury Press, 1974) pp. 88-89.

31. Logically, however, the word 'Semitic' covers a much wider range of peoples than the Jews. It cannot therefore be used in any way to describe the realities to which 'Jew/the Jews' refer in the New Testament.

32. A. daSilva, *Is there a New Imbalance in Jewish-Christian Relations? An Analysis of the Theoretical Presuppositions and Theological Implications of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue in the Light of the World Council of Churches' and the Roman Catholic Church's Conceptions of Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Studia Missionaria Uppsaliensia, 56; Uppsala, 1992), p. 132. In the opinion of daSilva, Radford Ruether's thesis is not true with respect to the assertion that 'the New Testament is anti-Judaic, i.e., against Judaism in all its forms or expressions throughout the entire history of Judaism'.

- (ii) the New Testament is anti-Judaic, i.e., against *only* the form in which Judaism expressed itself in New Testament times, especially with regard to some Pharisees and Sadducees.
- (iii) The New Testament has (a) *always* been read as anti-Judaic, or the New Testament (b) has *sometimes* been read as anti-Judaic.

Da Silva's analysis shows that although the New Testament may be characterized as anti-Judaic in these senses, it is not thereby itself anti-Jewish.³³

The question, however, is: does the extensive process of *righting the wrongs* in the Bible really belong to the translators, rather than to the commentators, interpreters and expositors of historical texts? As already hinted at in the two previous examples, I think not. That writers of exegetical works, when interpreting these historical documents, should be free to comment on the possible wrongs inherent in the texts themselves and/or in their *Nachgeschichte*, I think is justified. But, engaging in political, racial, gender- and class oriented purifying or re-interpretation of the texts in translation itself is a degree of hermeneutic work which results in emending the documents rather than translating them. Righting the wrongs, therefore should belong to the dialogue in the wake of the translated texts, to human behavior and to illuminating comments accompanying the texts in modern versions. This in turn may prepare the grounds for a changed attitude.

Greenstein, in a response to Pippin which challenges the principle of corrective translation, has given two reasons for keeping the effort of translation distinct from that of hermeneutics: 'privileging the source, and affording the reader more options in making sense of the translated text'.³⁴ This means that the translator is obliged to translate every occurrence of the Greek *ῥηδῶς / ῥηδῶν in context*, paying attention to its possible semantic domains as well as to the bearings the given context has on determining which of these meanings it carries there. In other words the translator ought to minimize the use of filters which prevent modern readers from coming as close as possible to the historical document and judging for themselves its quality and contents. And, since often the translated text is the basis on which the common Bible reader founds his or her opinions, its text should be accessible with all its greatness and limitations. From what we have seen so far translation as interpretation is a matter of degree rather than of principle, since all translation work employs:

33. daSilva, *Is there a New Imbalance*, pp. 132-46.

34. E.L. Greenstein, 'On the Ethics of Translation', *Semeia* 76 (1996), pp. 127-34.

interpretation to some extent. Translators of historical texts, and particularly of scriptural texts, should however—and here I follow Greenstein³⁵—avoid incorporating a high degree of hermeneutics into a rendering. The degree to which the Bible is used in interfaith dialogues and is challenged there by critics of historical principles of translation calls for editions where annotations at the bottom of pages or on separate pages—as in study editions—become the rule rather than the exception.

Rewriting the history of Christianity by cleansing its texts from mistakes and all traces of oppressive activities is not possible, unless the purpose is deception. Likewise, the texts of Christianity—including the Bible—cannot be amended or stripped of their human weaknesses, sociocultural embedding, and limitations without transforming them into entirely new and different documents, thereby deceiving the readers. If Christianity cannot accept the humiliating fact that such limitations which characterize humankind also apply to the Scriptures, it denies the historical nature of its own documents.

Interpreting the Readers and the Readers' Culture

Bridging Two or More Cultures

The sociocultural background and worldview of the intended readers condition their perception and understanding of Scripture.³⁶ In fact, the diversities in the practices and beliefs of different cultures represent the main difficulties in translation. Thus in addition to interpreting the originals and their cultural contexts, translators are faced with the need for interpreting the culture of the readers as well. This is necessary if translators are to fulfill their obligation: 'Translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language *the closest natural equivalent* of the source language message, first in terms of meaning, and secondly in terms of style'.³⁷

Ernst R. Wendland has aptly shown that the problem affecting many translators is not that they are overly contextualized in the direction of the receptor culture; more frequently it is a matter of being undercontextualized.³⁸ He points out two major reasons for this deficiency:

35. Greenstein, 'On the Ethics of Translation', p. 129.

36. Wendland (*The Cultural Factor in Bible Translation*) has devoted particular attention to this challenge to translation.

37. Nida and C.R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, p. 12.

38. See Wendland, *The Cultural Factor in Bible Translation*, p. 192, for this and the following

—a literal method of translation, which places more emphasis upon the S[source] L[anguage] form of the message than upon its contemporary meaning in the R[ecceptor] L[anguage]; and

—a lack of cultural awareness generally, with regard to the biblical context as well as that of the translators themselves and their constituency.

The result is a text which does not communicate to receptors as it should, either formally (i.e., the language is unnatural) or functionally (i.e., the communicative intentions of the original source are not realized).

Interpreting the readers and their culture is therefore an obligation for a translator. This is not less true in the case of translating metaphors and other figurative extensions of meaning.

Basically, figurative language is employed whenever non-figurative use of language would not be able to express the same as adequately. One should therefore take care not to lose this dimension of the originals when translating.³⁹ But the fact that figurative meanings tend to be 'culturally specific' makes it all the more challenging for translators to deal with them.⁴⁰ This does not mean that one is left with only the choice of a literal translation in case of figurative language. Wonderly has listed five techniques for handling metaphors in translation.

—use literal translation, if the reader is likely to understand it

—convert the metaphor to simile, that is: make explicit the figurative nature of the expression

—convert a metaphor to a nonmetaphor

—combined treatment, which means: retaining the metaphor or

converting it into a simile and supplementing it with a non-figurative statement of the meaning implicit in the figure

39. In the case of, e.g., Revelation it would conflict with the character and nature of the original text to reduce significant metaphors or all metaphors to non-metaphors. The object of the translator must be to make the words and expressions in the receptor language function as metaphors in the same way as they do in the original. Rather than avoiding totally the use of the Chinese word *lung* (= 'dragon') for the Greek *δράκων* in Rev. 12.3 (and subsequent instances in Rev. 12–13)—due to its overall positive connotations in the Han-Chinese language and wider cultural context—a qualitative should be sought which maintains the use of figurative language. Lü Chen-chun, overcame this problem in his translation (1968) by employing a qualifying word, *lǚ* ('perverse'). He thereby managed to preserve the notion of evil as well as the metaphor

40. de Waard and Nida, *From One Language to Another*, p. 153; for dealing with

—convert a metaphor to a different metaphor, that is: making use of a well-known metaphor instead of an unfamiliar one which people are not likely to understand⁴¹

And of these five techniques, only the third implies avoiding figurative language. The entire problem posed by figurative language shows how necessary it is for a translator to be able to interpret both the meaning of figurative extension of language in the originals as well as the effect which any solution is likely to have on potential readers and hearers.⁴²

Are the Words and Concepts Really that Culturally Unfamiliar?

A special challenge to the Bible translator is the translation of the name of God in the Bible.⁴³ The UBS Statement ‘How to translate the Name’ includes five options for translating biblical divine names, namely transliteration, translating as ‘Lord’, translating *YHWH* and *Elohim* in the same name from the culture, and translating *YHWH* and *Elohim* in the same way.⁴⁴ A sixth option is also possible: the use of a combination from the other five options.

To indigenous inhabitants of a culture transliteration suggests that there is no existing name of God in the culture which adequately renders the biblical name. But it also implies that the god to whom the Bible refers was not known by another name and therefore did not exist in this culture prior to the arrival of the religions of the Book: Judaism, Christianity, Islam. The theological implications of this from the perspective of a traditional trinitarian Christian faith are obvious: the Creator is introduced together with the Book only!

Mojola has told us, that in the Iraqw-language of Tanzania, the Swahili word *Mungu* had been employed in the New Testament translation of 1977 for ὁ θεός. In the trial edition of Genesis and the book of Ruth the Iraqw

name *Looa* was employed for God. A favorable reception on behalf of the Iraqw Christians was expected, but many found it unacceptable as rendering for the name of God. Their protest went along two lines. First *Looa* is associated with the sun; some people may even identify her with the sun.⁴⁵ To this Mojola comments: ‘There is no doubt that the Iraqw see *Looa* as the supreme God. The sun is understood to be only a symbol of the supreme God. It is not itself God, but God’s eye. This is similar to the Akan of Ghana who speak of God, *Nyame*, as “the Giver of light (sun)”’.⁴⁶

Secondly *Looa* in Iraqw-religion is described as feminine, while in the Greek and Hebrew testaments God is generally described as masculine. However, with regard to the overall qualities appropriated to *Looa*, they correspond well with God as described in the Bible: *Looa* is kind, merciful, the creator and protector, the giver of life, children, and blessing. She cares for her children, nourishes and protects them. She represents light, grace and motherhood.⁴⁷ As we know, both Old Testament and New Testament use the metaphor of God as mother, for example in Isa. 49.1: 15 and Mt. 23.37 / Lk. 13.34. The good qualities of God are referred to as *Looa*. In Iraqw, however, the supreme evil is conceived of as fatherhood, Darkness, vengeance, death, destruction and evil are all connected with fatherhood, *Neetlangw*.⁴⁸ It seems therefore that *Neetlangw* cannot be used and that there is a lot more to lose by adopting the foreign name for god—the Swahili *Mungu*—than using *Looa*. The Great Mother was also a well-known deity in Asia Minor and Greece in New Testament times, but could not challenge the notion of God as father, and in particular as father of the Son, Jesus Christ. This—and the ecumenical problem of referring to God as ‘she’, when most cultures, including the New Testament original text refer to him as ‘he’—still remains unsolved. While awaiting a solution Mojola reminds the translators:

The point is that both fatherhood and motherhood are metaphors, linguistic pictures, necessarily grounded and bound in time and space, and in particular historical cultures, subject to the circumstances of human cultural and linguistic change. It may be pointed out that the truths these metaphors convey are still valid and relevant. But how these truths are to be represented,

45. A.O. Mojola, ‘A “Female God” in East Africa: The Problem of Translator God’s Name among the Iraqw of Mbulu, Tanzania’, *BT* 46 (1995), pp. 229-36 (232)

46. Mojola, ‘A “female” God in East Africa’, p. 233.

47. Mojola, ‘A “female” God in East Africa’, p. 235.

48. Mojola, ‘A “female” God in East Africa’, p. 235.

41. Wonderly, *Bible Translations for Popular Use*, pp. 121-28.

42. deWaard and Nida (*From One Language to Another*, p. 152) have shown the importance of being concerned with the corresponding literal significance of figurative meaning, since there is always a factor of psychological awareness involved.

43. For a long time H. Rosin, *The Lord is God: The Translation of the Divine Names and the Missionary Calling of the Church* (Amsterdam: Nederlandsch Bijbelgenootschap, 1956) was the standard work dealing with this problem. In recent years the discussion has been raised anew in R.P. Sharleman (ed.), *Naming God* (New York: Paragon House, 1985) and in *The Bible Translator* (c.g. *BT* 43 (1992), pp. 403-406).

44. ‘How to Translate the Name: Statement by the “Names of God” Study Group, U.B.S. Triennial Translation Workshop, Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, 8-21 May 1991’, *BT* 42 (1992), pp. 403-406.

pictured, and communicated is a function of particular cultures and languages.⁴⁹

Theologically speaking, the issue is whether or not God—as known in the Bible—is only introduced to a culture and a language upon the arrival of Christianity. Is it really necessary to borrow the name of God from Swahili, Greek, Hebrew or any other language if one is to identify the God of the Bible? Since religious language is generally agreed to be essentially metaphorical and used often in a non-literal sense, the gender question seems to be a much lesser problem than having to introduce a god into a culture who is a total stranger, even as creator. The fear of using the indigenous name may become an unnecessary obstacle for introducing Christian faith. As Mojola puts it:

It should be noted that in general the use of God's name in the indigenous language and culture has helped to develop strong point of contact between the new faith and the indigenous traditional faith. It provides continuity and a basis for conversation between the new and the old. It provides a strong basis for giving a Christian meaning to existing forms and beliefs—adding, subtracting, or changing them as necessary. It makes possible a less hurtful transformation of the old and an easier translation to the new.⁵⁰

Thus, translation as an act of inculturation of religious texts also reflects theological choices. In the case of translating the name of God the issue at stake is not purely linguistic.

The choice may in fact decide whether or not the biblical God is to be considered interesting or even relevant at all for people in the receptor culture. Although a historical document, the Bible is also a collection of religious texts, and as such is in dialogue with peoples of different cultures and times. In spite of all the socio cultural differences, humankind shares some basic needs and abilities which either facilitate communication or prevent it. Common human experience from life is used to interpret new or familiar information. In making the Bible understood to readers in a different culture, translators must aim at communicating at the same 'wave-length' as the intended readers. The effect of interpretation depends on the ability to distinguish clearly and communicate effectively the intended meaning of the original texts. In doing so, one always depends on common human experience in one culture to communicate to the other. In the cases of figurative language and the name and concept of 'God' one constantly

depends on recognizing the familiar as well as the unfamiliar, and must use the familiar to express the unfamiliar.⁵¹ As an interpretive process translation cannot do without this.

Translation as Contextualizing

In dealing with our topic it seems wise, finally, also to address another area of theological contextualization,⁵² more specifically, the field of liturgical contextualization. Here the results of the *Worship and Culture* program of the Lutheran World Federation may be of help. In dealing with the question of inculturating the Christian liturgy in specific cultures, the studies have revealed that—among several possible methods—there are basically two main approaches to inculturation, namely the method of creative assimilation and the method of dynamic equivalence.⁵³

Creative assimilation tends to introduce new elements, while dynamic equivalence, which is a type of translation, confines itself to transmitting the content of a liturgical rite in a new cultural pattern. One thing to remember is that these two methods can overlap and need each other for a fuller effect.⁵⁴

Transferred to the field of translation, one may say that whereas dynamic equivalence is an adequate way to go about translating, creative assimilation belongs to the process of exposition and of making the significance of the texts understood in the modern cultural context where they are read. This is further illustrated in Chupungco's definition of liturgical inculturation.⁵⁵

51. Isomorphs are commonly used features of similarity and contrast in communication. Basically they are of two types, those which preserve information and those which alter information. (de Waard and Nida, *From One Language to Another*, pp. 63-71).

52. S.B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1992), presents five models for contextual theology.

53. These roughly correspond to the anthropological model and the translator model of Bevans (Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*), respectively, representing opposite ends of a spectrum.

54. A.J. Chupungco, 'Two Methods of Liturgical Inculturation's in S.A. Stauffer (ed.), *Christian Worship: Unity in Cultural Diversity* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1996), pp. 77-94 (94).

55. For a fuller treatment of the term 'inculturation', see A.J. Chupungco, *Liturgical Inculturation: Sacramentals, Religiosity, and Catechesis* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press 1997) pp. 13-26.

49. Mojola, 'A "female" God in East Africa', p. 236.

50. Mojola, 'A "female" God in East Africa', p. 237.

It is a process whereby pertinent elements of a local culture are integrated into the worship of a local church. Integration means that culture influences the way prayer texts are composed and proclaimed, ritual actions are performed, and the message expressed in art forms. Integration can also mean that local rites, symbols and festivals, after due critique and Christian reinterpretation, become part of the liturgical worship of a local church.

One result of inculturation is that the liturgical texts, symbols, gestures and feasts evoke something from the people's history, traditions, cultural patterns and artistic genius. We might say that the power of the liturgy to evoke local culture is a sign that inculturation has taken place.⁵⁶

Something is always lost when translating, but then something new is also gained. If what is gained makes the translation stand out as being in no rapport whatsoever with the original, the translation itself is bad or the interpretive activity has gone too far. In a consistent cultural-historical translation this could be the case: one might not be able to recognize the stories of the Bible from one culture to another.

Nida and Taber define cultural translation as opposed to linguistic translation as 'a translation in which the content of the message is changed to conform to the receptor culture in some way, and/or in which information is introduced which is not linguistically implicit in the original'.⁵⁷ Linguistic translation, however, is

a translation in which only information which is linguistically implicit in the original is made explicit and in which all changes of form follow the rules of back transformation and transformation and of componential analysis;... Only a linguistic translation can be considered *faithful*.⁵⁸

To use the parallel of liturgical inculturation: In a cultural translation the drive is toward creative assimilation; in a linguistic translation toward functional (or dynamic) equivalence. But whereas most linguistic translations will always move somewhere between creative assimilation and functional equivalence, good translations will abide by functional equivalence and leave the creative assimilation to the field of biblical interpretation or textual exposition. In this sense translation presupposes interpretation without being reduced to mere interpretation.

56. Chupungco, 'Two Methods of Liturgical Inculturation', p. 77.

57. Nida and Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, p. 199.

58. Nida and Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, p. 203.

Conclusion: Thesis Confirmed and Modified

In the presentation above I have drawn attention to several aspects of interpretation in Bible translating. They are not intended to be exclusive in any way, but are nevertheless representative. Although 'exegesis' or 'hermeneutics' are used almost indistinguishably by some writers, I have used interpretation to refer to the role of the linguistic translator, as distinct from that of the cultural-historical one, as played by the teacher/preacher the philosopher or the sociologist.

In this essay 'interpretation' is used in the sense of understanding or choosing between possible ways of understanding the originals. It is also used when looking for adequate renderings in the receptor language. When dealing with religious concepts and figurative language in religious documents such as the Bible the ability to interpret both original and receptor cultures is important for an adequate result.

I have also maintained that translation of historical and religious documents must not include so-called corrective interpretation, intended to rectify or polish away any unsympathetic impression left by the original on modern readers. This must be so, since the role of the translator is to preserve the original authenticity of the documents throughout the translation process. Translators must therefore leave to biblical hermeneutics the discussion of how to interpret texts from Antiquity to modern times. This is also a kind of translation process, but of a cultural-historical and not linguistic kind. This does not mean that readers of a translation should be left without such information which may enable them—on the one hand—to understand better the socio-political, historical and religious environment of the texts, and—on the other—to become more aware of problems which these texts have caused in the course of history, and still cause. This information must be provided but should be found in exegetical notes in the margins. And such notes, I think, must be provided plentifully. In this way informed readers will be able to enter discussions on questions related to, for example, elements of violence, race, gender and class in the Bible even when their discussion partners have no proficiency in the original languages of the Bible.

Thus the thesis of this chapter is both confirmed and modified: translation is interpretation, but not mere interpretation. In mainstream version the role of the translator is to provide a linguistic translation based on an exegetical interpretation of the originals, faithfully preserving and not altering their message. It is the role of hermeneutics to provide a cultural

historical interpretation which bridges the historical, cultural and religious gap between the original readers and the present. Such kind of interpretation is to be done *in front of the text*, which is the next step and which must not be confused with translation itself.