

THEOLOGICAL INFLUENCE ON TRANSLATION

MARTIN H. WOULDSTRA, TH.D.

1. Definition of terms

When Henry J. Cadbury was asked whether the transition from the quiet of the scholar's study to the chairmanship of the American Friends Service Committee was not rather abrupt he is said to have replied: "I am still trying to translate the New Testament."¹ In Cadbury's reply the term "translation" is used in what may well be called its widest possible meaning. It stands for putting into action the truths of the gospel.

While in the context of the present discussion the word is obviously used in a much more restricted sense the wider sense of the term "translation" should be constantly kept in mind. Both senses, the restricted and the comprehensive sense, have to do with the perplexing question of meaning. Both require a total understanding of the Bible's message and a corresponding desire to communicate that message to future generations. It is in this wider sense of the term that the Bultmannians seek to bring the "kerygma" in step with the present. Also in the past history of the church there have been these comprehensive "translations" of the Bible, especially of the Old Testament. What rabbinic casuistry, Qumranian eschatology and the allegory of Philo did with the Old Testament is a form of translation in the comprehensive sense. Some would even include here the early Christian understanding of the Old Testament.² But the term "early Christian" in this connection is of dubious clarity. It tends to blur the line between the canonical understanding of the Old Testament as contained in the New Testament and the post-canonical interpretations of the apostolic fathers and subsequently.

However, this stricture does not affect the main point. The main point is that translation involves interpretation and this in turn means that the translator, whether he conceives of his task narrowly or broadly, is bound to confront all the knotty problems which the field of interpretation ordinarily presents. As Kenneth Hamilton, the critic of the death of God theology, has remarked: "The claim to be able to translate is the claim to be able to go behind the words to the meaning of the words; and the claim to have discovered a radically new translation is the claim to have discovered a meaning obscured by previous translations. Any such claim has far-reaching dogmatic implications."³

1. This anecdote, which originally appeared in *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Jan., 1961, is here quoted via an article by James M. Robinson in *Ecumenical Dialogue at Harvard*, ed. S. H. Miller and G. E. Wright (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press, 1964) p. 93.
2. James Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 94, would consider all these approaches to the O.T., including that of the early Christian Church, to be forms of translation.
3. Kenneth Hamilton: *Revolt Against Heaven* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1965) p. 159.

It would seem therefore that translation is bound to be influenced by theology in one form or another. For translation is a specialized form of Biblical scholarship. And Biblical scholarship, although it should be zealous in avoiding undue encroachments from the field of systematic theology, nevertheless does not operate in a theological void. Theology, whether pursued scientifically or pre-scientifically, deals with the articulation of the knowledge of God as contained in God's revelation to man. To the extent that the translation and interpretation of the Bible seek to make their contribution to this articulation of the knowledge of God in his revelation, to that extent are they themselves theologically engaged.⁴

Yet the fact of the matter is that in the great majority of instances the word "theology," when used in connection with Bible translation and interpretation, is taken in an adverse sense, as something that must be kept down to a minimum, though its inevitable presence is grudgingly recognized. This is probably due to the fact that theology is too often viewed as being identical with mere theological conviction and hence as being necessarily subjective. Millar Burrows, in a useful review of the discussions preceding the 1962 revision of the RSV, offers an illustration of this point. Burrows informs us that some of the suggestions submitted to the revision committee "were based, as might be expected, on theological presuppositions."⁵ The passages where the possibility of theological interference is particularly great, according to Burrows, are those from the Psalms and Prophets which have traditionally been considered to be messianic. In this connection Burrows remarks that it is almost impossible for a translator "to keep his own interpretation from affecting his translation."⁶ The only safeguard against this is to make the theological base of the translation committee as broad and representative as possible. This, so he informs us, was done in the case of the Revised Standard Version.

Underlying Burrows' discussion there seems to be an identification between theological presuppositions on the one hand and a translator's own interpretation on the other. But is there no room for objectivity in theology? Granted that no one fully embodies in his mental structures the basic Biblical teaching without admixture of subjective elements, nevertheless it appears unwarranted to equate theological presupposition with mere theological conviction.

It has probably become apparent by now that the question of theological influence on translation is a profound one, one that touches on far more than meets the eye. The questions which confront us here are on the borderline between Biblical scholarship and philosophical and

4. On the theological character of Biblical exegesis from a Reformed point of view c. f. J. Ridderbos: "De Uitlegging der Heilige Schrift" in *Bijbelsch Handboek*, Vol. I (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1935), p. 381 and 409.
5. Millar Burrows: "The Revised Standard Version of the O.T." in *Congress Volume*, Oxford, 1959; Supplements to *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. VII (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960) p. 219.
6. *Idem*

apologetic inquiry. In the present speaker's opinion these are some of the most crucial questions facing us in this ecumenical age. It would be very worthwhile to pursue these questions further, since also among evangelicals differences of opinion about these matters are bound to exist. However, we shall devote the remaining part of these remarks to the more specific questions of Bible translation in the restricted sense and the role of theological influence upon it.

2. Historical and contemporary examples of undue influence of theology on translation.

As one looks for an example from history of theological influence upon translation he is reminded of the fact that the Hebrew word *almah* in Is. 7:14 which has been translated *parthenos* by the Septuagint, was rendered *neanis* in the later Greek translations.⁷ These later translations were made after the word *parthenos* had become an argument in the Christian theology of that day. Regardless whether one considers this change to have been correct or not, it cannot well be denied that theology entered into the making of the change.

For contemporary examples we may point to the recent Roman Catholic alterations in the RSV in order to bring the translation in line with the R. C. theological beliefs concerning the perpetual virginity of Mary. Another example, taken from the opposite side of the religious spectrum is the Jehovah Witnesses' omission of capital letters from the name of the Holy Spirit.⁸

3. Evangelicals and Theological Bias.

If Evangelicals should start to translate the Bible would they be free from undue theological influence? Already the opinion has been voiced that such a new translation may be expected to express the "true theology" with respect to Christology.⁹ This may well be an intimation of the feeling that translation prepared by those committed to the evangelical concepts of revelation and inspiration will not be able to achieve perfect objectivity. What about this expectation? The best way to find an answer to this question is to look at a particular problem in which the allegation of theological influence upon translation has been made. Thus we may at least come to an understanding of the problems involved.

4. Theological Influence upon the Translation of Psalm 45:7 (*kisakha 'elohim*)?²

A. Various Translations

The Septuagint: ho thronos sou, ho theos, e is aionon ainoonon.

The Vulgate: Sedes tua, Deus, in saeculum saeculi.

ASV: Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever (Text). In the margin: Or, Thy throne is *the throne* of God, etc.

7. Cf. August Knobel: *Der Prophet Jesaia* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1872), *ad loc.*

8. Cf. A. Hoekema: *The Four Major Cults* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1965) p. 240.

9. Cf. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 85, 1966, p. 1.

RSV: Your divine throne endures for ever and ever.

New Dutch Version: Thy throne, O God, stands for ever and ever.

Swedish (1917): Gud, din tron foerbliver alltid och evinnerligen.

Bible de Jerusalem: Pour toujours ton trone, o Dieu, et a jamais!

The Jerusalem Bible: Your throne, God, shall last for ever and ever.

Next to these translations taken from ancient and modern versions a few renderings taken from the commentaries may be noted:

Rudolf Kittel: Dein Thron, due Goettlicher.¹⁰ H. J. Kraus: similar.¹¹

Naethgen: Dein Thron ist ein Gottesthron.¹²

Weiser: Your throne, o divine king, endures for ever and ever.¹³

J. Ridderbos: Uw troon, o god! duurt eeuwig en altoos (Your throne, o god! endures eternally and always).¹⁴

This leaves us with at least four different possibilities. There is the translation which takes 'elohim as a vocative, and as standing for God, the deity. Then there is the possibility of taking the first word: *kis'akha*, as implying a construct state, which results in the translation suggested by the margin of the ASV and by Baethgen. Literally this would be: "Thy throne (is one) of God." Then there is the solution of Weiser who openly endorses in his translation the divine king theory. And in the fourth place we have the translation of Ridderbos who, while holding to the messianic nature of this psalm and also of this utterance, is apparently so impressed with the fact that this is an indirect messianic psalm that he renders 'elohim with "god" in lower case.

The question to what extent any of these translations betray undue theological influence is part of the larger question of what makes messianic prophecy messianic. Related to this question is that of progressive revelation and organic inspiration. Yet another question is whether the fact that the New Testament cites this passage in a certain manner via the Septuagint should have a bearing on how one translates the Old Testament phrase. And lastly there appears to be a need to consider the role of pastoral concern in the translation of the Bible.

It is well known that the question as to what constitutes messianic prophecy is currently again widely debated in Biblical Theological writing.¹⁵ While the lines of demarcation between truly Biblical scholarship and pseudo-Biblical scholarship are today somewhat hard to recog-

10. R. Kittel: *Die Psalmen*, Kommentar zum Alten Testament, (Leipzig: Deichert, 1914 *ad loc.*)

11. Hans—Joachim Kraus: *Psalmen*, Bibl. Kommentar A. T. Vol. XV, (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1960) *ad loc.*

12. F. Baethgen, *Die Psalmen*, Handkommentar A. T. (Goettingen: Vanden Hoeck & Ruprecht, 1892) *ad loc.*

13. Artur Weiser: *The Psalms* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962) *ad loc.*

14. J. Ridderbos: *De Psalmen*, Vol. II (Commentaar op het Oude Testament) (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1958) *ad loc.*

15. For a few recent Roman Catholic discussions of this point cf. John L. McKenzie: "The Transformation of O. T. Messianism" in *Studies in Salvation History*, ed. C. Luke Salm, F. S. C. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1964) pp. 96-113; and Bruce Vawter: "Messianic Prophecies in Apologetics," *Idem*, pp. 68-80.

nize the present writer nevertheless believes that these lines still exist and that it is mandatory that we clearly mark them. Perhaps there is no more crucial place where this must be done than in the area of messianic prophecy and its fulfilment.

There are, of course, a considerable number of emphases in current Biblical Theological writing which express sound Biblical thinking and may hence be retained by orthodox scholarship. Among these emphases may be listed the modern insistence of the pervasively messianic character of the Old Testament. The danger of isolating the so-called messianic passages from the rest of the Old Testament, though possibly not present in the mind of the various authors of the Christologies of the Old Testament, may well be an unintended by-product of their concern with the properly messianic passages. Thus it is possible that the Pauline observation to the effect that whatsoever was written aforetime (*hosa proe-graphie*)¹⁶ was written for our learning is somewhat lost sight of. This would be contrary to the Biblical consciousness. Paul does not restrict the patience and the comfort, which he expects to result in the having of Christian hope, to some isolated passages only. A significant phrase in the writer's opinion is also that which Luke uses when describing the messianic hope of the God-fearing in Jerusalem. Simeon, so Luke informs us, waited for the consolation of Israel.¹⁷ Thus in one comprehensive gesture we see all the messianic prophecies plus all the saving interventions of God in behalf of His people summed up in this one beautiful phrase: the consolation of Israel.

There is another point on which there may be a fair measure of agreement. This point concerns the progressive character of revelation as well as the organic nature of inspiration. Yet it is here perhaps more than in the point mentioned earlier that a real difference begins to appear. For while it may be true that the conservative and the liberal together subscribe to the progressive nature of revelation, they do definitely differ as to the revelation-character of the progress. All too often that which is presented in current Biblical Theological writing as a warning against too mechanical a view of messianic prophecy in relation to its fulfilment becomes in actual fact a means whereby a radically subjectivistic view of revelation enters into our Biblical scholarship. It is in this area that the influence of one or another sort of theology upon Biblical interpretation and translation is bound to be keenly felt.

The same may be said of the notion of organic inspiration. This term has been used to describe a non-mechanical view of inspiration in which allowance is made for the limitations of the historical horizon of the human authors of Scripture.¹⁸ The fact that these horizons were indeed limited could hardly have been stated more clearly than is done by

16. Romans 15:4

17. Luke 2:25

18. The term "organic inspiration" is found and discussed in H. Bavinck: *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 2nd ed., Vol. I (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1906) p. 456f.

the apostle Peter in I Peter 1:10ff. To make his point very clear the apostle uses language of a most absolute nature (they ministered "not unto themselves but unto you"). Yet this same passage also makes it abundantly clear that one cannot simply stop with the "original intention" of the first author in seeking to determine the true sense of a given passage in Scripture. For in spite of the limitation of their own horizon these prophets are nevertheless portrayed as having prophesied of the grace that should come to us (vs. 10). It is this latter emphasis which is largely lacking in today's hermeneutical discussion. Every possible stress is placed on the secondary authors, their limitations, their insights, their conceptions. No attention is paid to the Primary Author or to the totality of Scripture which He inspired.

The Bible translator meets these questions of progressive revelation and organic inspiration but he does so in a situation which does not allow for extended discourse but only for a simple choice of words with which to render the original. How can the translator make clear that his revelation concept is not the highly subjectivized one of modern critical scholarship? How can he express his desire to do justice to the limited horizon of the first recipients of revelation while on the other hand trying to do justice to the no less important factor of the totality of the Scriptural witness? In the specific case before us, should he choose a capital letter for God, should he follow Weiser's suggestion and render the phrase "O divine king," or should he be ready to omit capital letters from the word for the Deity, as is done by Ridderbos, a man who as the present speaker knows from personal acquaintance with his person and writings, is thoroughly committed to the orthodox view of Scripture?

Let us consider the last mentioned possibility for a moment. Ridderbos fully acknowledges the messianic nature of Psalm 45. This means that he holds that this Psalm truly finds its fulfilment in Christ. The word fulfilment should here be taken in its orthodox sense and not in the sense of a mere realization of the hopes and longings of Israel. With Ridderbos typology has retained its traditional sense. The use of the Old Testament in the New is not just condoned as something that we with our more literal bent of mind would hardly dare to allow for ourselves.¹⁹

Ridderbos acknowledges on the one hand that some of the language of Psalm 45 clearly exceeds the limits of the merely human. As such is mentioned the fact that verse 7 speaks of the throne being "for ever and ever" as well as the fact that the king is addressed as "god." Yet, since this appellation during the Old Testament period was indeed given to beings other than God, Ridderbos concludes that the use of this word here need not make us choose in favor of a directly messianic Psalm. Moreover, allowance should be made for poetic hyperbole. This also applies to the phrase "for ever and ever." But since Ridderbos clearly recognizes the intention of the Holy Spirit behind the words of the human

19. This is, e.g., the way in which C. H. Dodd treats this question. Cf. C. H. Dodd, *The Old Testament in the New* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963) p. 24.

authors he equally clearly asserts that these words actually did point to a reality which exceeded a merely earthly kingship. Moreover, the total background of this Psalm is the Nathan prophecy of II Samuel 7. Again there is no reason to suppose that Professor Ridderbos views this prophecy in any other than orthodox terms.

As is well known Delitzsch viewed Psalm 45 as "an indirectly eschatologically Messianic Psalm." According to Delitzsch these are psalms in which according to the time of their composition, messianic hopes are referred to a contemporary king, but without having been fulfilled in him; so that, in the mouth of the church, still expecting their final accomplishment, these psalms have become eschatological hymns and their exposition as such, by the side of their chronological interpretation, is fully warranted."

Again it should be noted that this is an orthodox way of presenting the problem. No doubt is raised about the legitimacy of the later church in its eschatological interpretation of this Psalm.

Concretely, however, the translator is faced with the necessity of expressing in the choice of one or two words some of the most involved problems of Biblical hermeneutics. In which direction will he look for an answer? Granted that a measure of further interpretation will be needed beyond the mere translation of the Hebrew term, what sort of interpretation does the translator anticipate? And how does the fact that this passage also functions prominently in a New Testament context where it clearly is applied to the divine Messiah, Jesus Christ, enter into the discussion? If one, on the basis of the New Testament understanding of the phrase, would wish to translate the Old Testament as "thy throne, o God" what would happen to the category of an indirectly eschatologically messianic Psalm? Or should not the reader of an ordinary Bible version be alerted to that kind of hermeneutical intricacy?

What, then, is the general purpose of a Bible translation and how does the theological influence, which, as has been pointed out is inevitable and wholesome, enter into our decision-making processes? If the word "God" in capital letters is saying too much for this indirectly eschatologically messianic Psalm, it may well be argued that the word "god" in lower case is saying too little in terms of the total meaning which this passage actually has.

It appears to this observer that translation procedures as well as any other principles pertaining to questions of hermeneutical and interpretative import should be drawn up in close connection with the prevailing theological trends at any given period. Today's problem in Biblical scholarship certainly cannot be said to be an excessive concern with the unity of Scripture or with the factor of the inspiration and inscripturation of a divinely authoritative word revelation.

A Bible translation, apart from individual choices of words in indi-

vidual instances, each of which must be carefully weighed, also has a totality aspect which it conveys to the readers. For this reason it may be plausibly argued that the total impact of a translation prepared by evangelicals should be that of an enlightened commitment to the doctrines of organic inspiration and progressive revelation, neglecting neither the inspiration factor for the sake of the organic nature of the inspiration process, nor the revelation factor for the sake of the historical progress through which this revelation was gradually communicated to man.

Bible translation should truly be what the word says, it should be a translation of the Bible. Those who hold to the current emphases of pseudo-Biblical Theology do not actually translate a Bible. What they are translating is an historical collection of accumulated and ever-expanding horizons of religious insight. This kind of theological influence on Bible translation should be avoided at all cost. It cannot be avoided by simply incorporating in one's translation committees a broad spectrum of theological conviction. It can only be avoided if Biblical scholars who set out to translate the Bible cease relegating the questions of inspiration and revelation to an imaginary faith-realm, but instead make these questions the very foundation on which their entire scholarship rests. Without the latter kind of theological influence no Bible translation will be truly successful.

Calvin Theological Seminary
Grand Rapids, Michigan