

## Retranslations of Holy Scriptures: Why Keep Translating the Bible?

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### 1. Introduction

The topic of this article is the phenomenon of the many retranslations of the Bible. Why would people make yet another translation of the Bible in English, or Korean or Dutch? Which needs and motivations drive this aspect of Christianity, now and in the history of Bible translation? In order to deal with that question of the continuing retranslation of the Bible, I will look at the issue first from an historical perspective, second from the perspective of Christian communities today, and third from a theological perspective.

The historical perspective is important because it helps to understand the roots of the Christian tradition to translate and retranslate the Word of God over and over again. In fact, I will argue that Christianity from its very beginning was a translational religion, building on the translational traditions of Hellenistic Jewish communities and their sacred literature.

The perspective of today is also needed because we do not retranslate the Bible just because it is our tradition to do so. We need to ask ourselves how we relate to that heritage and how we pass it on to new generations. Ultimately, the

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issue of retranslating Holy Scripture is a theological and spiritual one, with its roots in biblical theologies of Scripture.

## **2. Roots and beginnings: an historical perspective**

Christianity started with a Jewish rabbi and His twelve disciples.<sup>1)</sup> They were Jews in the first century in a Greco-Roman world at the time when there were many different Jewish theological and political factions and various Jewish faith communities that differed a lot from each other. The New Testament speaks of that religious diversity in Hellenistic Judaism, for example the Sadducees and Pharisees, with charismatic rabbis, political revolutionaries or communities that withdrew into the desert for a life of quiet and austere contemplation. There were Jewish communities all over the Greco-Roman world, in the Diaspora where the knowledge of Hebrew or even Aramaic gradually was lost and had given way to koine Greek, the common language in the eastern part of the Roman Empire.

After the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD the picture of Jewish religious diversity that we see reflected in the New Testament writings changes. The Jews lost the ritual, sacrificial priestly center of the Temple in Jerusalem. Many Palestinian Jews fled to the Diaspora communities in Alexandria, Rome, Greece, Asia Minor, or the Arab Peninsula. The Torah, the Prophets and the Writings now became the center of their religion and their liturgy, replacing the Temple and its sacrificial rites. Judaism developed more and more into a text-centered religion with the Hebrew Scrolls at the liturgical center and with a very prominent role for the rabbis who could read and explain the Hebrew Scrolls, replacing the priestly political elites of Jerusalem in spiritual, social and political leadership roles. These scrolls became objects of veneration, the center of the liturgy and

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1) Section 2 is based on materials found in Philip A. Noss, ed., *A History of Bible Translation* (Rome: Edizioni Di Storia E Letteratura, 2007), especially in chapters 3 (David Burke), and 12 (Harry Sysling), and the helpful summary of early Christian translation history of Breed (Brennan Breed, "What Are the Earliest Versions and Translations of the Bible?", *Bible Odyssey* [2018], accessed 2 July 2019 from <https://www.bibleodyssey.org:443/en/tools/bible-basics/what-are-the-earliest-versions-and-translations-of-the-bible>).

source of guidance for life in strange places among strangers. Every word, every letter of the Torah, was studied by the rabbis to extract guidance from and derive regulations for daily life that fenced the Jews off from their social surroundings. There was a tendency to tie the Word of God strongly to the Hebrew language of the Scrolls, with the specialist rabbis studying and explaining the Hebrew words, letters and phrases. The particularistic idea of Hebrew as a holy tongue, already present in the 2nd century before Christ, for example in the Book of Jubilees, was reinforced in rabbinic Judaism after the fall of Jerusalem<sup>2)</sup> but universalist views of Hebrew as one language among others, all equally fit to contain and express the Word of God, also survived in rabbinic Judaism, never a monolithic block<sup>3)</sup>.

But we should not project the second and third century world of rabbinic Judaism on the pluriform Judaism in the centuries before the fall of Jerusalem. The writers of the Greek New Testament were Hellenistic Jews for who the Word of God was not bound to the Hebrew language. The vast majority of quotations and allusions to the writings of the Old Testament in the New Testament are from the Old Greek translations. These Greek Scriptures are quoted as Holy Writ that speaks with authority. The Jewish Christians were not exceptional in this regard. Other Jewish groups and communities had come to accept Greek form of the OT writings as Holy Scripture.

The earliest Christian communities centered on the veneration of Jesus Christ, the “Word made flesh”. They did prefer Greek Holy Scriptures written on codices over the Hebrew scrolls. “The holiness resided not in the written text or the language in which it was written but in the Christological reality to which it witnessed”.<sup>4)</sup> These Christian communities continued translational practices of their Jewish ancestors.<sup>5)</sup> The first translations of Holy Scripture appear as early as the Babylonian Exile in the 6th century before Christ.<sup>6)</sup> Most Jewish folks living

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2) Theo A. W. Van der Louw, *Transformations in the Septuagint: Towards an Interaction of Septuagint Studies and Translation Studies* (Louvain: Peeters, 2007), 51.

3) *Ibid.*, 52-54.

4) David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 279.

5) Brennan Breed, “What Are the Earliest Versions and Translations of the Bible?”.

6) *Ibid.*

in Babylonian exile spoke only or mostly Aramaic, the lingua franca or common language of the empire, and it became necessary for the rabbis in the synagogues to have someone orally render the readings from the Hebrew scrolls into Aramaic. These oral interpretations and explanations, spoken paraphrases called *targumim*, eventually became written down in the first and second centuries after Christ. But these Aramaic translations of Holy Scriptures functioned in rabbinic contexts and the rabbis as a rule did not accept the Aramaic translations as having authority, let alone as replacements of the Hebrew Scrolls in the liturgy.<sup>7)</sup> However, as generations after generations used the Aramaic translations, in some times and places the Aramaic versions received more and more authority and became accepted in the synagogue liturgy as the Word of God. This liturgical role of the Aramaic versions has survived until today in the synagogues of Yemenite Jews on the Arab peninsula.<sup>8)</sup>

The Old Greek versions quoted in the New Testament with authority as the Word of God also had ancient roots in Jewish Diaspora life. Ever since the third century before Christ when the Greek empire of Alexander the Great had turned Greek into the major lingua franca, Jewish communities all over the ancient world had begun to translate Hebrew scrolls into Greek, starting in Egypt with the Torah. For many Jewish communities and groups in the days of the writers of the New Testament, not for all to be sure, these Old Greek Holy Scriptures had acquired a lot of authority, leading people to accepting that God could also speak to His people through Greek Scriptures, loosening the ties between the Word of God and a specific language or language form. A well-known advocate of the authority of Old Greek Scriptures is the Jewish scholar Philo of Alexandria in the first century. He writes about the translators of the Greek Scriptures that they “as if inspired by God, became like prophets, not everyone with different words, but everyone with the same words and the same turns, as if an invisible prompter had dictated them”.<sup>9)</sup>

The earliest Christian communities accepted the Old Greek versions as the

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7) Ibid.

8) Ibid.

9) Philo in *De Vita Mosis* II, 37, quoted in Theo A. W. Van der Louw, *Transformations in the Septuagint: Towards an Interaction of Septuagint Studies and Translation Studies*.

Word of God, just as many other Jewish groups had done. Only after the fall of Jerusalem in the first centuries when rabbinic Judaism emerged as the dominant factor in Jewish life and when the split between Synagogue and Church was definitive and sharp, rabbinic Jews returned to the Hebrew Scrolls of a specific textual tradition that would become the Masoretic text in mediaeval times.<sup>10)</sup>

Meanwhile, the Christians embraced the Old Greek versions, edited, expanded and revised them, on top of the additions of earlier Hellenistic Jewish editors and translators.<sup>11)</sup> Crucially, early Christians embraced their collection of Old Greek versions as their liturgical text, and combined them with early Christian Greek writings by the apostles and others into the Greek Bible known as the Septuagint. With their increased focus on the Hebrew Scrolls, rabbinic Jewish communities started to perceive the Septuagint as a Christian text, a corruption of the Holy Hebrew Scrolls. It was this Septuagint, the Greek Christian Bible, that was translated into Latin (2nd and 3rd century), Coptic (3rd century), Armenian (5th century) and Arabic (9th century).<sup>12)</sup> The Eastern Orthodox Churches use the Septuagint to this day as their Bible.

The inescapable conclusion is that Christianity from its inception continued the rich translational traditions of their Jewish ancestors. Before the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD early Christians shared with some other Hellenistic Jewish communities the universalist belief that God was not bound or tied to a specific holy language in his communication with humankind. After the fall of Jerusalem particularistic rabbinic views became dominant in the centuries that followed in many synagogues of the diaspora, binding the holy Hebrew language and God's revelation tightly together.

This does not mean that more universalistic theologies of Scripture were not found in rabbinic Judaism; it was never a monolithic block.<sup>13)</sup> But Christianity from its very beginning allowed translated Scriptures to function in the liturgy to speak with authority as Holy Writ. The Greek translation was no longer a

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10) Brennan Breed, "What Are the Earliest Versions and Translations of the Bible?"

11) Ibid.

12) See Philip A. Noss, ed., *A History of Bible Translation* (Rome: Edizioni Di Storia E Letteratura, 2007) for Latin, Coptic, Armenian and Arabic versions.

13) Theo A. W. Van der Louw, *Transformations in the Septuagint: Towards an Interaction of Septuagint Studies and Translation Studies*, 25-55.

servant of the Holy Text, as a parallel explanatory text, but its *skopos* broadened to become not only a Holy Text in liturgy but also as the basis and judge of theological disputes.

The same can be said of Jerome's Latin Vulgate or the English King James Bible: they became the Word of God for their faith communities. Christianity in this sense is more radically a translational religion than Judaism and Islam. The Greek Septuagint, and soon its Old Latin translation, became so much the Word of God that the Hebrew Bible was pushed towards the periphery, almost forgotten by many Christians. So much so, that when St Jerome in the 4th century wanted a new Latin translation of the Old Testament translated from the Hebrew, the church had a hard time to accept that new Latin version that we now know as the Vulgate.<sup>14)</sup>

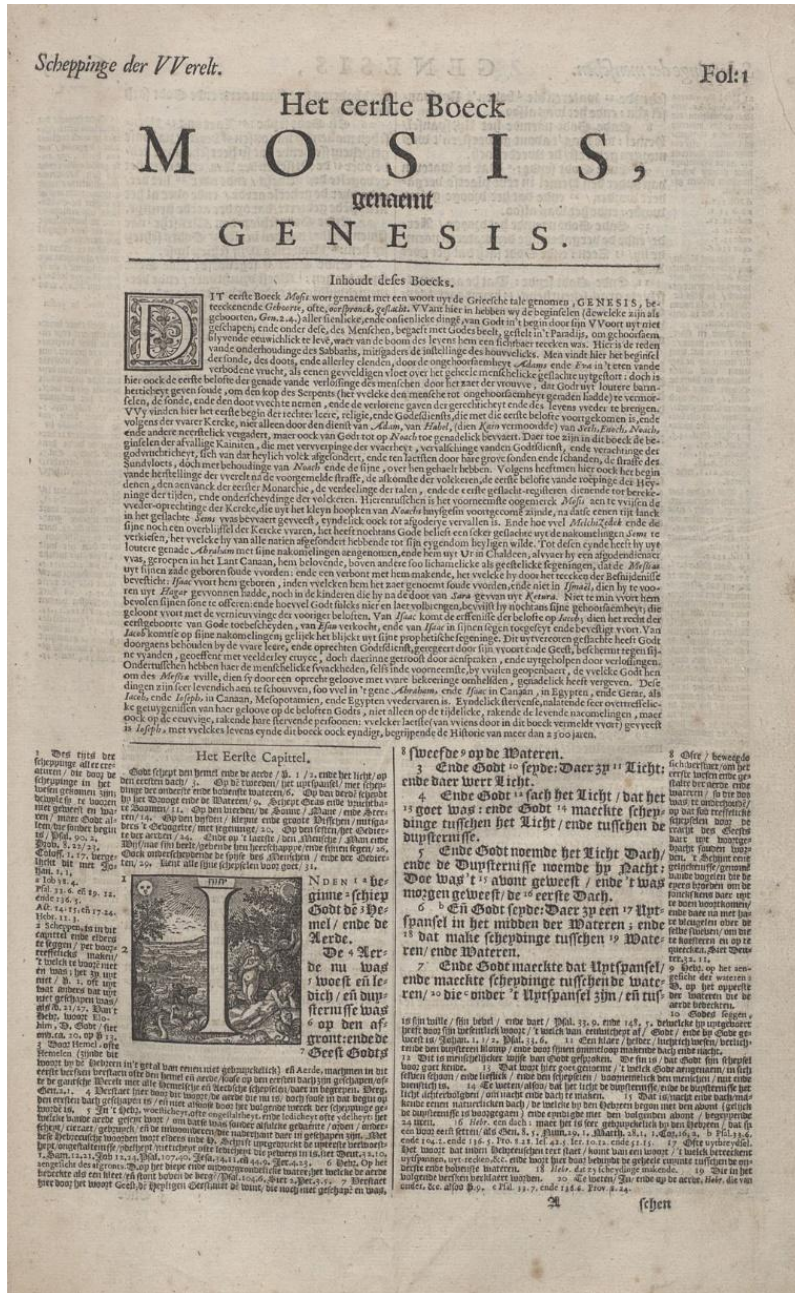
### **3. Contemporary perspectives: why are there so many translations for us to choose from?**

Bible translations have expiry dates just like food items on the shelves of our supermarkets. This is because languages change all the time, spelling systems change, insights in the biblical languages and exegesis change, but also the base texts that are used for Bible translation change, as do the things that people want to do with their Bibles in church, in daily life and in society. Divisions and splits in the church, for example in the time of the Reformation, also created the need for retranslation. Take for example the Dutch Authorized Version from the 17th century (see fig. 1). For Dutch Protestants it was very important that lay people could read and understand the Bible themselves, so it was not only necessary to retranslate the Bible into Dutch but also to add helps for reading and understanding for people without a theological education at seminaries. Therefore they added many layers of metatext such as introductions, marginal notes, illustrations, pericope titles and so on:

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14) Brennan Breed, "What Are the Earliest Versions and Translations of the Bible?"

Figure 1. Genesis 1 in Dutch Authorized Version of 1637



The ancient versions of early Christianity were also corrected, revised and redacted until they reached their expiry date. And then a new translation in the same language followed. For example, the 2nd century Old Latin translations of the Bible were replaced when Christian communities started to accept the new translation of St. Jerome of the 4th century.<sup>15)</sup> So, revising and retranslating is

15) D. Burke, "The First Versions: The Septuagint, the Targums, and the Latin", Philip A. Noss, ed., *A History of Bible Translation* (Rome: Edizioni Di Storia E Letteratura, 2007), 82-89.

indeed a key part of the history of Christianity as a translational religion.

Changing technologies of writing, copying, making books are a key factor in the history of the Bible. The change from scrolls to codices, for example, made it possible to have multiple books of the Bible in one volume. Before that, there were just separate scrolls of Holy Writings. The invention of the printing press again changed the history of the Bible and its translation in very dramatic ways. Today we experience another technological change, the digital revolution, with great impact on the translation of the Bible. Paratext 8 and other software makes it possible to check consistency of spelling, or key terms or formatting in a few minutes. And hundreds of corrections can be implemented in seconds. The developments in technology made it much easier and cheaper to revise, correct or retranslate the Bible. Bible translations for special audiences began to appear, such as Bibles in sign language, Bibles for people with limited literacy skills, study Bibles, interlinear Bibles and so on.

But behind all these factors that drove constant retranslation of the Bible in our languages, there is one overarching fundamental factor that is characteristic for Christianity as a translational religion: the deeply felt need for *actualization* of the Word of God, that is to make the Word of God clear, actual and relevant for new generations in new circumstances. The actualization motive was already behind the Aramaic and Greek translations of Hebrew Scripture in the centuries before Christ. H. Sysling<sup>16)</sup> in his study of translation techniques in Old Greek and Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Scriptures concludes “that they all try to *actualize* Scripture, interpreting it and applying it to their own historical and religious situation and time”, for example the Aramaic Targum Neofiti on Genesis 10:10 replaces the geographical names with contemporary ones that the new audience could relate to: “And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Edessa, Nisibis, and Ctesiphon in the land of Babel” rather than “Babel, Erech and Accad, all of them in the land of Sinear” as in Hebrew Scripture.<sup>17)</sup> But where these Aramaic and Greek actualizing versions in many places did not take over the liturgical role of the Hebrew Scriptures as sacred text with authority, early Christianity accepted the actualising translations as the Word of God, as

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16) H. Sysling, “Translation techniques in the Ancient Bible translations: Septuagint and Targum”, Philip A. Noss, ed., *A History of Bible Translation* (Rome: Edizioni Di Storia E Letteratura, 2007), 278.

17) *Ibid.*, 303.



testifying to the Christ, worthy to be the only form of Scripture used in their gatherings and liturgy. This actualization factor is the topic of the next section.

#### **4. Bible Translation as liturgical incarnation of the Logos: a theological perspective of actualization**

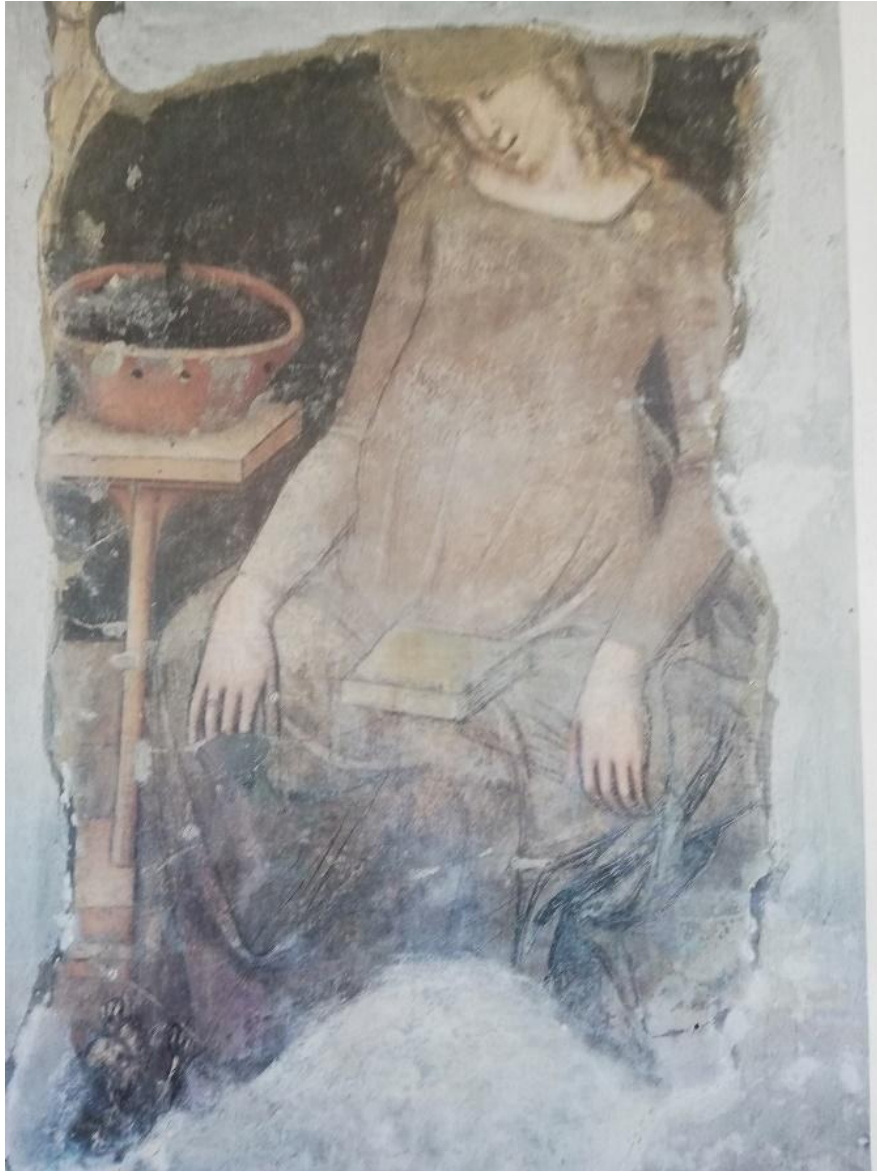
As we saw, the earliest Christian communities centered on the veneration of Jesus Christ, the “Word made flesh”. They read the sacred writings of what we now call the Hebrew Bible in Greek and for them these ancient Greek Scriptures were filled with Christ, as Christ Himself and His apostles had taught them when they applied the writings of the Psalms, Isaiah and other books to the mission, life and death of Christ. Christ had fulfilled the books of the Law and the Prophets. The earliest Christians, predominantly Jewish, preferred the ancient Greek version of the Psalms, Isaiah and the other sacred scriptures. For them “The holiness resided not in the written text or the language in which it was written but in the Christological reality to which it witnessed”.<sup>18)</sup> From their perspective the Word of God, the Logos, was a universal gift to all humans, and not at all tied to the linguistic and cultural horizons of special holy languages.

Codices and papyri, writing materials from daily life, with Greek, Latin, Coptic translations of the old sacred writings of the Law, the Prophets and the new writings of St. Paul, the evangelists and others with apostolic authority did appear and quickly spread over the ancient Christian world. All these Holy Scriptures, whether translated Hebrew Scriptures or newly written New Testament writings in Greek, had a single purpose from the perspective of many early Christians: to testify to the risen Christ and to make the Logos present and bring the Logos into the human words and human worlds wherever the Word of God travelled, coming to them not as a distant stranger, exotic, in foreign clothing and speaking in a foreign tongue, but becoming a Jew for the Jews and a Greek for the Greek. The Logos that was born as Mary’s son, incarnate in her flesh, was believed to be the same Logos that the (translated) Holy Scriptures testified to and were filled with, as in this fresco “the Madonna about to give birth” by the 14th century painter Vitale of Bologna:

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18) David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature*, 279.

Figure 2. The Madonna about to give birth by Vitale of Bologna



The Christian codices and also papyri with Holy Writings functioned in a largely oral liturgical setting in small congregations that gathered in homes of believers or in rented rooms where the shared food and the drink made the risen Christ present in their bodies and souls, representing the holy presence of the Christological reality to which their sacred Greek or Latin writings also testified.<sup>19)</sup>

This actualization and translation process of the Word of God, the Logos, started in the New Testament and was continued by the Christian Church wherever it was planted: the written Word of God (witnessing to the Word-made-flesh), they

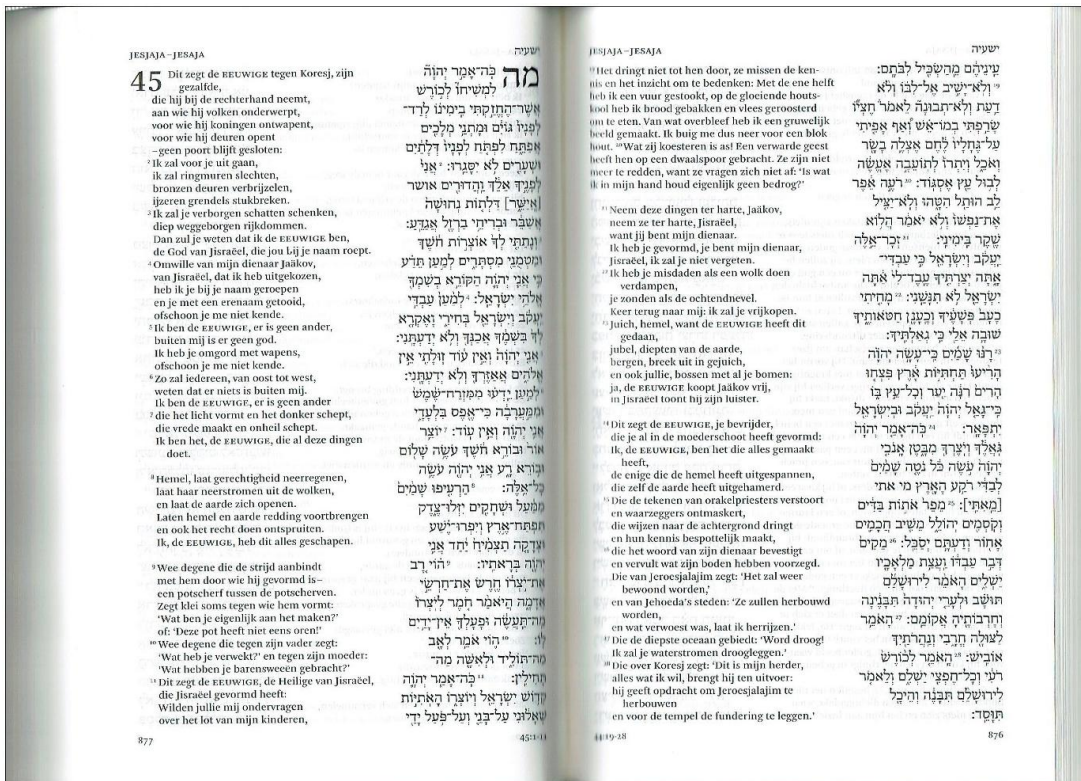
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19) Ibid.

believed, needed to become incarnate again and again, it needed to be written on the tablets of the hearts. This belief that God wants to speak to us in the here and now through his Word, is one of the strongest recurring motivations in the history of Christian translations and retranslation of the Bible. Translation, therefore, is incarnation from this point of view, the Word is incarnated, and must be incarnated over and over again as it travels through place and time.

The *liturgical* actualization in translation is what sets Christian traditions to an extent apart from many faith communities within other world religions with Holy Books. The translated Holy Scriptures, from Vulgate to King James, have *replaced* the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek Scriptures as the center of worship and liturgy in Christendom. When believers take the Bible with them to church, it is a translation and what they hear from the pulpit is a translation. In faith communities where the translation is just a fallible servant to the Hebrew or Greek Holy Text, translations may be allowed in the liturgy but always in audible or visible conjunction and subordination to the Holy Text. This may take for example the form of a two-column Bible with the Hebrew Holy Text in the center, the right column and the explanatory servant translation in the left periphery, as in this Tanach edition.

Figure 3. Hebrew Bible (MT) and Dutch Interconfessional Translation (NBV) in the Tanach edition



JESAJA - JESAJA  
**45** Dit zegt de EEUWIGE tegen Koresj, zijn gezalfde,  
 die hij bij de rechterhand neemt,  
 aan wie hij volken onderwerpt,  
 voor wie hij koningen ontwapent,  
 — geen poort blijft gesloten:  
<sup>1</sup> Ik zal voor je uit gaan,  
 ik zal ringmuren slechten,  
 bronzen deuren verbrijzelen,  
 ijzeren grendels stukbreken.  
<sup>2</sup> Ik zal je verborgen schatten schenken,  
 diep weggeborgen rijkdommen.  
 Dan zal je weten dat ik de EEUWIGE ben,  
 de God van Jisraël, die jou lij je naam roept.  
<sup>3</sup> Omville van mijn dienaar Jaakov,  
 van Jisraël, dat ik heb uitgezogen,  
 heb ik je bij je naam getoepen  
 en je met een erenaam getooid,  
 ofschoon je me niet kende.  
<sup>4</sup> Ik ben de EEUWIGE, er is geen ander,  
 buiten mij is er geen god.  
 Ik heb je omgord met wapens,  
 ofschoon je me niet kende.  
<sup>5</sup> Zo zal iedereen, van oost tot west,  
 weten dat er niets is buiten mij.  
 Ik ben de EEUWIGE, er is geen ander.  
<sup>6</sup> die het licht vormt en het donker scheidt,  
 die vered maakt en onheil scheidt.  
 Ik ben het, de EEUWIGE, die al deze dingen  
 doet.  
<sup>7</sup> Hemel, laat gerechtigheid neerregenen,  
 laat haar neerstromen uit de wolken,  
 en laat de aarde zich openen.  
<sup>8</sup> Laten hemel en aarde redding voortbrengen  
 en ook het recht doen ontspruiten.  
 Ik, de EEUWIGE, heb dit alles geschapen.  
<sup>9</sup> Wee degene die de strijd aambindt  
 met hem door wie hij gevormd is —  
 een potscherf tussen de potscherven.  
 Zeg: Klei soms tegen wie hem vormt?  
 "Wat ben je eigenlijk aan het maken?"  
 of: "Deze pot heeft niet eens oren!"  
<sup>10</sup> Wee degene die tegen zijn vader zegt:  
 "Wat heb je verwekt?" en tegen zijn moeder:  
 "Wat hebben je barenweeen gebracht?"  
<sup>11</sup> Dit zegt de EEUWIGE, de Heilige van Jisraël,  
 die Jisraël gevormd heeft.  
 Wilden jullie mij ondervragen  
 over het lot van mijn kinderen,

ישעיה  
**מ** כִּדְרֵי אֲמַר יְהוָה  
 לְמַשִּׁיחִי לְכֹרֶשׁ  
 אֲשֶׁר־הִתְקַדַּח בְּיָמָיו לְרִד־  
 לִמְנוּ גֹזִים וּמְהִי מַלְכִים  
 אֲפַקֵּחַ לַפְתַּח לְמַנְי דְּלֹתִים  
 וְשַׁעֲרִים לֹא יִסְגְּרוּ: אֲנִי  
 לְמַנְי אֲלֹךְ וְהִדְרִים אוֹשֵׁר  
 [אֲשֶׁר] דְּלֹתֹת נְחוּשָׁה  
 אֲשַׁבֵּר וּבְרִיחֵי בְרָזֶל אֲנַעֲבֵ:  
 [וְנִתְּתִי לְךָ אֲבִירוֹת חֹשֶׁךְ  
 וּמְסַבְּנֵי מִסְתָּרִים לְמַעַן תִּרְעַע  
 כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה הַקּוֹרֵא בְּשִׁמְךָ  
 אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: יִלְמַעַן עֲבָדֶי  
 יַעֲלֹב וְיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּחַיְרֵי וְאִקְרָא  
 לְךָ בְּשִׁמְךָ אֲבָנָה וְלֹא יִדְעוּנִי:  
 אֲנִי יְהוָה וְאֵין עוֹד וְיִלְמְנֵי אֵין  
 אֱלֹהִים אַחֲרָי וְלֹא יִדְעוּנִי:  
 יִלְמַעַן יִדְעוּ מִמִּוֶּרֶחַ־שָׁמַיִם  
 וּמִמְעַרְבֵה כִּי־אֲפָס בְּלִעְנֵי  
 אֲנִי יְהוָה וְאֵין עוֹד: יִצְוֶר  
 חוֹר וּבֹרֵא חֹשֶׁךְ עֵשֶׂה שְׁלֹמֹם  
 וּבֹרֵא בְּעֵי יְהוָה עֵשֶׂה  
 קֵל־אֲצִלָּה: הֲרַעֲיַפּוּ שְׁלֹמֹם  
 מִלְּמַעַל יִשְׁתַּקֵּמוּ יְלִדְיָ־עֵדֶךָ  
 חַפְתֹּחַ־אֲרָץ וְיִפְרֹד־יָשָׁעֶיךָ  
 וְיִחַקֵּה עֲמִלְּוִו יְהוָה אֲנִי  
 יְהוָה בְּרֵאחֵי: יְהוֹ רַב  
 אֲחִי־יִצְוֶר חֹרֶשׁ אֲחִי־חֹרֶשִׁי  
 אֲדַמָּה הֵיאָמַר חֹמֶר לִי־צִוֶּר  
 מִדְּמַעֲשֵׂה פִּקְלֵךְ אֲחִי־יָרִים  
 לִי: הֵי אֲמַר לְאֵב  
 מִדְּחֹלֵד יְהוָה וְלֹאֲשֶׁה מִדֶּ־  
 וְחִלְּוִי: כִּדְרֵי אֲמַר יְהוָה  
 קוֹדֵשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיִצְוֶר הַאֲתִחוֹת  
 שְׁאֲלוּנֵי עַל־בְּנֵי עַל־יְעַל־לִי

JESAJA - JESAJA  
<sup>1</sup> Het dringt niet tot hen door, ze missen de kennis en het inzicht om te bedenken: Met de ene helft heb ik een vuur gestookt, op de gloeiende houtskool heb ik brood gebakken en vlees geëroosterd om te eten. Van wat overbleef heb ik een gruwelijk beeld gemaakt. Ik buig me dus neer voor een blok hout. <sup>2</sup>Wat zij koesteren is af: Een verswaarde geest heeft hen op een dwaalspoor gebracht. Ze zijn niet meer te redden, want ze vragen zich niet af: 'Is wat ik in mijn hand houd eigenlijk geen bedrog?'  
<sup>3</sup> Neem deze dingen ter harte, Jaakov, neem ze ter harte, Jisraël, want jij bent mijn dienaar. Ik heb je gevormd, je bent mijn dienaar, Jisraël, ik zal je niet vergeten. <sup>4</sup> Ik heb je misdaden als een wolk doen verdampen, je zonden als de ochtendnevel. Keer terug naar mij: ik zal je vrijkopen. <sup>5</sup> Juich, hemel, want de EEUWIGE heeft dit gedaan, jubel, diepten van de aarde, bergen, breek uit in gejuich, en ook julle, bossen met al je bomen: ja, de EEUWIGE koopt Jaakov vrij, in Jisraël toont hij zijn luister.  
<sup>6</sup> Dit zegt de EEUWIGE, je bevrjdder, die je al in de moederschoot heeft gevormd: ik, de EEUWIGE, ben het die alles gemaakt heeft, de enige die de hemel heeft uitgespannen, die zelf de aarde heeft uitgehamerd.  
<sup>7</sup> Die de tekenen van orakelstijfers verstoort en waarzeggers ontmaskert, die wijzen naar de achtergrond dringt en hun kennis bespottelijk maakt, <sup>8</sup> die het woord van zijn dienaar bevestigt en vervult wat zijn boden hebben voorgezgd. Die van Jeroesjalajim zegt: 'Het zal weer bewoond worden,' en van Jehoeda's steden: 'Ze zullen herbouwd worden,' en wat verwoest was, laat ik herrijzen.' <sup>9</sup> Die de diepste oceanen gebiedt: 'Word droog!' Ik zal je waterstromen droogleggen.' <sup>10</sup> Die over Koresj zegt: 'Dit is mijn herder, alles wat ik wil, brengt hij ten uitvoer: hij geeft opdracht om Jeroesjalajim te herbouwen en voor de tempel de fundering te leggen.'

ישעיה  
 עֵינֵיהֶם מִהַשְׁקִיל לִבְתָּם:  
 "וְלֹא־יָשִׁיב אֵל־לִבּוֹ וְלֹא  
 יִדְעַת וְלֹא־תִבְנֶה לְאִמֵּר חֲצִוֹ  
 עַל־רַפְתֵי בְמוֹ־אֵשׁ וְאֵף אֲפִיחִי  
 עַל־חֲזִוֵי לֶחֶם אֲצִלָּה בְּשֵׁר  
 וְאֵל וְהִדְרוּ לְחֹשֶׁבֶה אֲעִשֶׂה  
 לְבֹל עֵץ אֲסֹדֶר: "רַעֲיָה אִפְר  
 לֵב הַחֵתֶל הַשָּׁהוּ וְלֹא־יִצְלִיל  
 אֲדַנְפִּישׁוּ וְלֹא יֵאמַר הֲלֹא  
 שְׁמֶךָ בְּיָמֵינוּ: "יְקַר־אֲצִלָּה  
 שְׁמֶךָ וְיִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי עֲבָדֶי  
 אֲתִיחַ וְיִצְוֶרֶד עֲבָדֵי־לִי אֲתִיחַ  
 יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא תִשְׁעֵנִי: "מִחַיְרֵי  
 כַעֲב פִּשְׁעֶךָ וּכְעַנְךָ חַטֹּאתֶיךָ  
 שׁוּבָה אֵלַי כִּי נִגְלַמְתִּיךָ:  
<sup>3</sup> רַעֲוֵ שְׁלֹמֹם בְּרַעֲשֵׁה יְהוָה  
 הֲרַעֲוֵ מַחֲתֹתֹת אֲרָץ פְּצוּחַ  
 הָרִים רָחֵ: יַעַר וְלִעֲצֵי בֹ  
 כִּי־אֲצִלָּה יְהוָה יַעֲלֹב וּבִי־שְׂרָאֵל  
 תִּפְאָר: "כִּדְרֵי אֲמַר יְהוָה  
 נִגְלַחֵד וְיִצְוֶרֶד מִקֶּבֶץ אֲנִי  
 יְהוָה עֵשֶׂה לִּי נֶטֶה שְׁלֹמֹם  
 לְבִדִי יַעֲוֶה אֲרָץ מִי אֲתִי  
 [מִמַּתִּי]: "מִפֶּר אֲתוֹת בֹּדִים  
 וְקִטְמִים יְהוֹלֵל מִשֵּׁיב חֲקִמִים  
 אַחֲרֵי וְעִקְמִם יִסְבֵּל: "מִקִּים  
 דְּבַר עֲבָדוֹ וְעִשָׂה מִלְּאִכּוּז  
 יִשְׁלִים הֵיאָמַר לִירוּשָׁלַם  
 תִּשְׁלֵב וְלִעֲרִי יְהוּדָה תִּבְנֶה  
 וְחַרְבֹּתֶיהָ אֲקוּמִם: "הֵיאָמַר  
 לְעֹלָה תִרְבֵי וְנִמְרֹתֶיךָ  
 אֲבִישׁ: "הֵיאָמַר לְכֹרֶשׁ  
 רַעֲוֵ וְכִל־חַפְצֵי יִשְׁלֵם וְלֵאמֹר  
 לִירוּשָׁלַם תִּבְנֶה הַיְהִי  
 תִּנְשֶׁר:

Clearly, Jewish and Islamic communities use translations of their Holy Books but these translations tend to have a different place and function (*skopos*):<sup>20)</sup> they are secondary explanatory texts for the lay people that serve the Holy Texts in Hebrew or Arabic and that as a rule do not replace the Holy Texts in Hebrew or Arabic *in the liturgy* or as a text that speaks with divine authority.

In fact, many religious leaders in the history of Jewish and Islamic faith communities were concerned about the danger that a mere human and fallible translation would become the Word of God for their people, and would be central text in the liturgy of mosque or synagogue. That is why the rabbis in the Diaspora tolerated and appreciated the Aramaic *Targumim* translations but only as servants who have to know their place. These servants should never strive to replace their master, the Holy Writ in Hebrew or Arabic in the liturgical and spiritual center. “Many of the rules that were given for the delivery of the Targum were intended to keep the reading of Scripture in Hebrew, and its Aramaic translation, strictly apart.”<sup>21)</sup> The secondary place of the translation is reflected for example in the rule that the translation could only be read out after the reading of the Hebrew scroll was finished, and the reader of the translation was not allowed to look at the Hebrew scroll.<sup>22)</sup>

In some times and places the translation was only tolerated in oral form, and when in later times written Aramaic translations appeared it was often not allowed to bring them into the synagogue.<sup>23)</sup> Only in exceptional cases, in faraway places, as with the Yemenite Jews, Aramaic translations gradually received a honored status as beloved holy books that could fulfill liturgical roles.<sup>24)</sup>

In liberal Jewish communities, translations of the Hebrew Bible may have more central roles in the life and liturgy of their faith communities than in more orthodox communities. So the picture is nuanced. In the Christian world, the Latin Vulgate, originally a servant of the Greek LXX master, became so honored and gained such immense authority that it started to function as a Holy Text in

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20) See C. Nord, *Translation as a Purposeful Activity* (Manchester: St. Jerome, 1997).

21) P. S. Alexander, “The Targumim and the Rabbinic Rules for the Delivery of the Targum”, 1985, J. A. Emerton, ed., *Congress Volume Salamanca* (Leiden: Brill, 1983); H. Sysling, “Translation techniques in the Ancient Bible translations: Septuagint and Targum”, 294.

22) Ibid.

23) Brennan Breed, “What Are the Earliest Versions and Translations of the Bible?”.

24) Ibid.

the liturgy that needed its own explanatory translations or glosses in Dutch or English. In many Catholic congregations the Latin Vulgate no longer functions as dominant liturgical text. At the same time, for some Protestant faith communities in the United States' Bible Belt, the King James Version has become the center of worship and the basis for theologizing, in a role similar to the Vulgate in mediaeval Christianity. Evidence for this sacralisation of the King James is a fierce resistance to retranslations, newer English versions, even very literal ones.

But mainstream Christianity continues the old ways of the very first Jewish Christians and of the writers of the New Testament, the deep conviction that the Logos, the Word of God, does not depend on a single language or a single "Holy Translation", a tradition of translating that is rooted in an incarnational theology of Scripture, language and translation, driven by the deeply felt need of actualization.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper addressed the question why retranslation of the Bible, even when other contemporary translations are available, plays such a central role in the history of Christian Bible translation. It was argued with David M. Carr and others that the ways in which New Testament writers interacted with what we now call the Old Testament reflects that for them "The holiness resided not in the written text or the language in which it was written but in the Christological reality to which it witnessed".<sup>25)</sup> The actualization motive is shown not only by the fact that the translated Greek Scriptures are quoted in the vast majority of the New Testament quotations and allusions but also in the way in which the quoted Greek passages are recontextualized and adapted to make them speak to actual issues and contexts of the New Testament writers. The writers of the New Testament followed intertextual practices that are also found in other Hellenistic Jewish communities of the intertestamental period.

Early Christians continued this model of interaction with the holy writings of

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25) David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature*, 279.

the Old Testament: the Greek translations also testified faithfully to the Christ, and accordingly acquired a central place as Holy Writ in liturgy and as a basis for theological reflection.

This actualizing interaction with holy writing forms the basis for Christian traditions of (re)translating the Bible. If translated holy texts are believed to be the Word of God and to speak with divine authority to every new generation of believers, retranslation becomes a must, not just when translations are aging and become harder to understand but also to retranslate for special audiences, function or needs, from common language versions to literary and liturgical versions, in all available media and formats offered in the digital age.

<Keywords>

Incarnation, Bible translation, actualization, retranslation, liturgy.

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&lt;Abstract&gt;

**Retranslations of Holy Scriptures:  
Why Keep Translating the Bible?**

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Why are there so many retranslations of the Bible and why accept Christians Bible translations rather than Hebrew or Greek texts as authoritative texts in the center of their spiritual and liturgical life? This is because Christianity, from its very beginnings and because of its deep roots in Hellenistic Judaism a translational religion, was driven by motives of actualization, especially liturgical actualization through translation: the Word, the Logos was believed to need incarnation in the linguistic and cultural worlds which it encountered during its long and still unfinished journey through the world.

The actualization motive was already behind the Aramaic and Greek translations of Hebrew Scripture in the centuries before Christ. Sysling in his study of translation techniques in Old Greek and Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Scriptures concludes “that they all try to actualize Scripture, interpreting it and applying it to their own historical and religious situation and time”.<sup>26)</sup> For example, the Aramaic Targum Neofiti on Genesis 10:10 replaces the geographical names with contemporary ones that the new audience could relate to: “And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Edessa, Nisibis, and Ctesiphon in the land of Babel” rather than “Babel, Erech and Accad, all of them in the land of Sinear” as in Hebrew Scripture.<sup>27)</sup>

The *liturgical* actualization in translation is what sets Christian traditions to a great extent apart from many faith communities within other world religions with Holy Books. The translated Holy Scriptures, from Vulgate to King James, replaced the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek Scriptures as the center of worship and liturgy in Christendom. These translations function as Holy Texts, with authority, in the center of our worship services.

The translational nature of Christianity and the actualization motive are

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26) H. Sysling, “Translation techniques in the Ancient Bible translations: Septuagint and Targum”, 280.

27) Ibid., 303.



already clearly visible in the writings of the New Testament in their dealings with Hebrew Scriptures. The earliest Christian communities centered on the veneration of Jesus Christ, the “Word made flesh”. They read, quoted, and alluded to the sacred writings of what we now call the Hebrew Bible in Greek, and for them, these ancient Greek Scriptures were filled with Christ. For them, “The holiness resided not in the written text or the language in which it was written but in the Christological reality to which it witnessed”<sup>28</sup>).

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28) David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature*, 279.