

## Beyond the Translation of the Danish Bible in 2023

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On March 2020, the Danish Bible Society published its new translation of the Bible into contemporary Danish, *Bibelen 2020* ["The Bible 2020"]. Now, in 2023, we can look at Bible translation with fresh eyes and consider some of the issues. Planning of a new Danish Bible translation for 2036 has started, and translators can learn from the previous project. This issue of HIPHIL Novum traces some of the contemporary challenges of a Bible translation for a country with a Lutheran national church. Back in 2020, the Bible society had planned not only celebrations and services to mark this important milestone for a language of six million native speakers, but it had also planned presentations and events throughout Denmark in order to open up the message of the Bible to Danes less familiar with the Bible and a Christian world-view and to meet the needs of the younger generation. Unfortunately, only nine days before, on March 11, 2020, all public activity was put on hold following the announcement by the Danish Prime Minister that Denmark should close down due to the Covid19 pandemic.

This obstacle was not the only one, however, and certainly not the least of the tribulations that hit this new translation in its infancy. A month later, on April 17, the former chairman of the Danish organization Ordet og Israel ["The Word and Israel"], Jan Frost, in a YouTube video raised serious criticism of the new translation. Almost everywhere except for two cases, the word "Israel" was left out in the translation of the New Testament, and "Israel" was not retained accurately from the original Hebrew text in the translation of the Old Testament.

Frost had raised this criticism already in 2008 when the New Testament was translated and published for the first time in 2007. The problem he raised did not lead to revision when the Danish Bible Society published the second version in 2011. When a translation of the Old Testament along somewhat similar principles began in 2013, "Israel" was of course not banned, but it was not reproduced everywhere. When this new Old Testament translation was revised and edited for publication from 2018 and onwards, the society decided to publish it along with the New Testament translation of 2007/2011 as part of The Bible 2020 without revision of the translation of "Israel" in its New Testament part. Frost now had an occasion to renew and extend his criticism.

Two days later, the translation of "Israel" was made into a media story by the right-wing media 24NYT.dk which claimed that "Israel" was left out for political reasons in the translation.<sup>1</sup> The next day this news was distributed by Lipshiz in an article in the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. He added that Frost on his Facebook profile expressed his opinion that the name Israel was avoided due to replacement theology.<sup>2</sup> From now on the news was covered by the main Jewish papers. The translation was vehemently attacked in social media for antisemitism as well as for being a false translation, and many international church leaders seized the moment to condemn this kind of translation. The

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<sup>1</sup>"Politiske motiver bag den falske bibeloversættelse (leder)" by André Rossmann (<https://24nyt.dk/politiske-motiver-bag-den-falske-bibeloversaettelse/>; accessed May 31, 2023).

<sup>2</sup>"Jan Frost, a Bible enthusiast and supporter of Israel from Denmark ... counted 59 omissions out of 60 references to Israel in the Greek origin for New Testament texts. References to "the People of Israel" were replaced with "Jews," while "Land of Israel" became "the land of Jews." (<https://www.jta.org/quick-reads/danish-bible-society-defends-translation-that-omits-dozens-of-references-to-israel>; accessed May 30, 2023)..

Bible Society in Israel voiced this same criticism,<sup>3</sup> while the Danish Bible Society tried to defend its translation.<sup>4</sup> The Danish Israel Mission tried to strike a balance.<sup>5</sup>

This is not the place to pursue this heated debate further. Because I was personally involved as a minor contributor to The Bible 2020 translation, I took part in the debate, but I also started planning a conference for September later that year. I wanted to give a voice to both sides of the debate over the translation of the name “Israel”, but also to learn more about the broader scholarly issues involved in a translation of the Bible. I was fortunate enough to have several of the key persons in the debate agree to participate. Unfortunately, however, the Covid19 crisis struck again, and it became increasingly difficult to get the original presenters to meet together at the new date. In the end, we were left with a much smaller workshop, “Bible translation in theory and practice,” on March 18-19, 2022, celebrating the two year birthday of The Bible 2020. The papers were less representative of the anniversary occasion, and the focus had shifted. I am pleased eventually now to be able to publish contributions of this workshop. The first four papers have passed peer review, while the remaining ones are published as given orally, except for the last paper. My aim is to publish them now as a *status questionis* in 2023 of issues involved in translating the Bible.

The lead-paper was not presented at the conference. In order to present the proper academic framework for a translation like The Bible 2020, I elicited a contribution on contemporary Bible translation theory by an internationally acclaimed expert, Professor Dr Ernst Wendland, University of Stellenbosch. His paper, “Exploring the Theory and Practice of Modern Bible Translating: A Selective Overview” is a very helpful summary of the *status questionis* of the field in terms of theory and practice and a very useful point of departure for the discussion in the other contributions. Even if it is a selective overview of “*biblical translation studies*”, it is an instructive and complete description of major styles of translation as the expression of creative art and experiential craft. Wendland presents the principal theories, defines what translation means and applies it to his “literary functional equivalence” (*LiFE*) method focusing on effective communication for a specific audience-related purpose. Examples from functionally-based versions in Chichewa are presented in terms of their frames of reference. He applies this discussion as advice on how to choose among contemporary Bible translations.

Dr Stefan Felber, former Old Testament Associate Professor at St. Chrischona Theological Seminary in Switzerland was invited as the author of *Kommunikative Bibelübersetzung. Eugene A. Nida und sein Modell der dynamischen Äquivalenz* published by the German Bible Society in 2013, second edition 2016. His first paper for the workshop, “Functional equivalence: Eugene Nida’s theory, its challenge for Bible Translation, and its theological burden,” summarizes his arguments and puts them into perspective for a contemporary discussion of the seminal contribution of Nida to the translation theory of Dynamic Equivalence. Felber traces how Nida’s theory has influenced translations to become less faithful to the forms of the source text. He illustrates this from the way that nominal chains are changed into a series of verbs in Mark 1:4 in order to disambiguate complex meaning. To explain how this happens, Felber traces essential stages in Nida’s development of his ideas on communication throughout his career. Felber concludes with a critique of Nida’s preference for communication theory rather than philology, linguistic theory rather than theological scholarship, and clarity rather than

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<sup>3</sup> The staff of the Bible Society in Israel published “Our Statement on the Contemporary Danish Bible 2020” (<https://biblesocietyinIsrael.com/our-statement-on-the-contemporary-danish-bible-2020/>; accessed May 25, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> In “Fake news about new Danish Bible” <https://www.bibelselskabet.dk/new-danish-bible-2020-and-israel> published 22<sup>nd</sup> of April 2020.

<sup>5</sup> “Statement regarding the contemporary Danish translation of the Bible” by Arne Pedersen, Krista Rosenlund Bellows, Jan Holm Mortensen, Jakob Wilms Nielsen and Bodil Skjøtt (<https://israel.dk/statement-contemporary-danish-bible/>; accessed May 25, 2023).

accuracy. In his view the legacy of Nida is to shift the focus away from revelation in words to personal relationship, verbal or otherwise.

What Felber attacks in translation is illustrated by the Danish Senior Translation Consultant of SIL, Iver Larsen, who at the workshop embodied the practical side of Bible translation. In his paper “Communication and Bible translation”, Larsen contrasts the literal and the meaning-based translation types and recommends the use of the Relevance Theory proposed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, and introduced to Bible translation by Ernst-August Gutt among others. Larsen sets up five criteria to adhere to in a meaning-based translation for communication that captures (1) accuracy (the originally intended meaning), (2) clarity (what the intended audience will understand), (3) naturalness (normal language usage in the target-audience), (4) acceptability (avoiding rejection by readers), and (5) logic (reasonable contextual senses). Larsen provides a number of examples from translations to illustrate his points. Larsen is the only non-Lutheran contributor to the volume.

The second paper by Stefan Felber argues that Luther is often misused by proponents of meaning-based translation. In his paper, “Heritage, Promise and Obligation: A Plea for the Enduring Significance of the Luther Bible for the Communication of the Gospel”, Felber describes how deeply Luther’s translation of the Bible shaped the German language and how poets and authors have praised his work throughout the centuries. Furthermore, Luther struck a strong theological note in his practice as a translator. On the one hand, he strove to capture a common and contemporary language usage, yet on the other hand he retained and defended the central theological concepts crucial to the Reformation, at times even clarifying sense beyond the forms in the source. Felber argues that this stance should be maintained as an important theological heritage in future translation work, especially in translations claiming to be revisions of Luther’s original contribution.

While these four papers were peer reviewed, the next three papers, all dealing with the Bible 2020, are published here as presented during the workshop, the first in English and the next two in Danish.

The paper by Dr Martin Ehrensverd, Associate Professor at the University of Copenhagen, is a unique look under the hood of the translation work described by one of the leading figures on the translation team. In his paper “A Litany of Excruciatingly Difficult Choices: The Making of Bibelen 2020,” Ehrensverd describes the choices that was made for the Old Testament from 2013 and onwards into the revision. Since the word for ‘sin’ carries a different sense in contemporary Danish, it was always translated according to its contextual meaning. When concepts were retained, they were often explained by ‘making the meaning of the text explicit’ as when ‘blessing’ was explained as material rather than spiritual. The ‘fear of God’ became ‘show respect’ (Isa 8:13; Gen 22:12) or ‘love of God’ (Isa 11:2). In some cases, the translation provided an exegesis (Lev 10:1; 2 Sam 24:1). Genealogies were shortened drastically, mentioning only the first and last person in a lineage. Danish “ark” was rendered as ‘chest’ (of Covenant) or ‘ship (of Noah), ‘judges’ became ‘leaders’, and words for ‘penis’ and ‘ejaculation’ were not rendered by euphemisms. In general, the goal was to make sense of the final text in spite of presumed contradictions and unevenness, usually using conservative text-oriented commentaries as a guide.

Associate Professor, Carsten Vang, from the Lutheran School of Theology in Aarhus in his paper “Bibelen 2020 – hvorfor tøver jeg? [The Bible 2020 – why do I hesitate?]” grants that there are many examples of good renditions in the new version of the Old Testament (Eccl 3:11; Hos 13:14; Gen 28:12), but there are also a large number of bad choices and misinterpretations, and he argues this based on the rendition of the name of God. When the YHWH is translated ‘God’ (Ex 3:15; 6:2-3; Deut 6:4), the personal identity and the contextual significance is lost. Vang argues that God is described in terms of universal religion as ‘God is righteous’ (Jer 23:6), and to put the name of the Lord upon the Israelites (Num 6:27) does not mean that ‘God will make sure that it turns out well for them’.

In Deut 32:8 and elsewhere the translation assumes that there existed an ancient divine assembly and sometimes it supports polytheistic religion. In addition, he lists a number of places where the effort to communicate for the target-audience has resulted in a wrong exegesis of the text.

Reverend Hans-Ole Bækgaard, chairman of the Danish Inner-Mission fellowship [Indre Mission] seconds the preceding criticism. In his paper, “Bibelen 2020 og kirkens brug – en udfordring? [The Bible 2020 and its use by the church – a challenge?]”, he applauds the new translation for focusing on Bible literacy and for opening up Scripture to modern man. However, he is critical of the potential loss for the church, if in the interest of communicative power and readability central theological concepts are translated into new and less felicitous usage. Most of his examples relate to the New Testament translation of 2007 and 2013 because it is now increasingly having an impact on preaching in the churches and may be replacing the Common Danish Version of 1992 authorized for use in the worship service. The main problem is the avoidance of central Biblical terms. The term ‘sin’ means more than ‘cross the line’, ‘fail’, ‘do evil’, or ‘resistance’; ‘grace’ does not mean only ‘to hold the hand under’; there is no theological notion of the saints being both righteous and sinners at the same time (the Lutheran *simul justus et peccator* theology). Bækgaard illustrates this from Psalm 51, Rom 5:12-14 and Ephesians 2. Furthermore, it is implied that believers will avoid death rather than perdition (John 3:16). Conversion is translated as ‘return home’ or ‘change one’s life’, and the true sense of justification is lost in Rom 3:25 and 1 John 4:7-18. The Holy Spirit is referred to as ‘it’ rather than ‘he’ in the Johannine Writings and often in the Old Testament reduced to ‘breath’. The Logos is no longer referenced as God in John 1. A number of his examples are related to the use of ‘divinity’ instead of ‘glory’, which affects the translation of the baptismal text of 1 Pet 1:4. For the sake of the gospel, Bækgaard calls for a retention of the theological core concepts in a Bible for use in the church.

The final paper by myself returns to the initial problem that generated the ill fame of the Bible 2020 internationally. My paper, “Oversættelsen af *Israel* i *Bibelen 2020*: Om teori og praksis i kommunikativ bibeloversættelse [The translation of “Israel” in The Bible 2020: On Theory and Practice in communicative Bible translation]” was submitted after months of analysis from May through July in 2020. However, at first it was rejected by one journal because it was too technical. Then it was accepted provisionally by another journal, but on condition that I took into account that the Danish Bible Society over the summer had revised its New Testament translation in order to address the criticism raised against it. I now publish the original paper even though it only pertains to the original first edition of the Bible 2020. The paper describes the theory and methods of functional equivalence translation that the Bible 2020 should be measured against. It then tracks how “Israel” was translated for the New Testament edition from 2007, which remarkably often translated *Israel* by “the Jews” or the “Jewish people”. I also checked the Book of Psalms where at times *Israel* is translated as “we” in order to increase reader-involvement. The next steps were book-by-book probes into the 2503 occurrences of the word *Israel* in the Hebrew Bible, a check up against a random list of 70 pro-land and Jerusalem references and finally a comparison with a dispensationalist text-book. My conclusion was that translators applied individual styles in their rendition of the word, but there was never an anti-Israel or anti-eschatological stance or tendency in the translation of the Hebrew Bible. What is at stake rather is the challenge of specifying the appropriate contextual meaning in contemporary language.

Even if these contributions clearly have very different scopes and goals, they all in several ways illustrate the problems we face in Bible translation as we try to address and use new theory for contemporary audiences yet also have to consider whether a translation is acceptable to the local churches and interest of the average “Bible consumer” on the market as well as the theological issues at stake in soteriology and eschatology.