A Litany of Excruciatingly Difficult Choices:
The Making of Bibelen 2020.

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Abstract: Two events have the potential to define a Hebrew scholar's career. One is if a major text find (such as Qumran) takes place. The other is if a major bible translation project is launched. It has been my great fortune and misfortune that this did in fact happen on my watch.

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Introduction

Often, the academic stuff I write about is highly technical, typically related to syntax of long-dead languages such as biblical Hebrew. But this paper will not be technical. I will introduce a bit of translation theory, but mostly I will present and discuss the hardest choices we had to make when translating this book that a large number of people still live and die for. I will also write about sex. There's a lot of sexual imagery in the bible, some of it very explicit and shocking, and that presents some difficult problems for a translator.

Bibelen 2020

Bibelen 2020 came out on 20. March 2020, one week into the first COVID lockdown in Denmark. In 2007 the Danish Bible Society had published the New Testament in contemporary Danish, and this was part of an international trend of very free translations of the bible.

Traditionally, you can probably easily imagine how literal bible translations are. Many or most bible readers consider this text to some degree to be the word of God, so when faced with the choice between a more easily readable, flowing text and a more cumbersome, literally translated text, most translations choose the latter. God's word must be presented as it is. If e.g. a Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek word, phrase, sentence, or text was ambiguous, translators would strive to match that ambiguity in the target language.

Furthermore, bible jargon is pervasive. Translations normally assume that the reader has a good grasp of biblical concepts such as sin, blessing, angel, apostle, Levite, fear of God etc. etc. And they assume that readers, at least on a good day, know that words such as Israel or Judah sometimes denote a person, sometimes a people, sometimes territories – but that Israel never, of course, refers to the modern state of Israel. Give a bible to a bunch of teenagers, however, and you would be surprised to see how many would think of the modern state when they read about Israel in the bible.

In terms of translation theory, this is called source-language focus. In stark contrast to that stand the aforementioned free translations. They focus intently on the target language and try to help the reader as much as possible. The Bibelen 2020 project started up in 2013 with the aim of producing an Old Testament and then a full bible using the principles from the 2007 New Testament. These principles included using normal Danish language and normal Danish terms, without bible jargon. We would explain terms such as the aforementioned list, such that e.g. sin often became 'doing what God does not want' or 'breaking God's law', 'letting God down', 'disrespecting God', 'doing evil', 'acting

stupidly', 'becoming guilty'. Now why couldn't we just use the word sin? Well, sin in contemporary Danish, outside of the church, is mostly used about things such as delicious but unhealthy foods. Exquisite cakes and chocolates are what a sin is today. We really did strive for fresh language with as little jargon as at all possible. And when I say 'we', here and in the following, I mean the group of Hebrew specialists (Søren Holst in particular, who is the originator of several of the best points of this article) of which I was one, the group of contemporary Danish specialists, and the Bible Society editors and general secretary. I translated about the half of the texts and was closely involved in the extensive final editing.

In terms of principles, we would use gender-inclusive language whenever suitable and possible, since often only males are explicitly mentioned, but clearly females are included. 'The sons of Israel' in Hebrew means 'Israelites' and includes the daughters of Israel, even if not specifically mentioned. We would also not use slang but strive to produce good, beautiful Danish. And when a word or a text presupposes an understanding that ancient Israelites probably had but that modern readers might not have, we would simply add that to the text. We would not use footnotes but add words or whole sentences to the text. When it e.g. says in Genesis 3:20 that Adam named his wife Eve because she was the mother of all the living, we add the sentence which means life after Eve's name. We called it 'making the meaning of the text explicit'. An ancient Israelite would know immediately that her name was derived from the word for life, so we feel it is fair to add that to the text.

Let me return to the list of examples of jargon that we strove to replace. As for blessing, in the end we in most instances actually kept the word, after initially preferring the expression 'giving life strength'. The backlash against dropping the word blessing was too hard. But we would often add a few words to help the reader understand what the word means in a given context – people often understand it to refer more to a spiritual connection with God, but in the Hebrew texts, it usually has to do with material things or good health or many children. So when e.g. in Isaiah 19:25 the Hebrew text says 'God bless them', we say 'God bless them' and we add: 'and give them strength'. 'And give them strength' is not found in the overt Hebrew text, but we are again making explicit what we believe is the meaning so as to avoid misunderstanding.

We were intent on not using the term angel, because it's terribly easily misunderstood. Just picture an angel in your head and you'll know what I mean. You see, in ancient Israel, you could often not distinguish an angel from a regular person. So when three angels come to visit Abraham at Mamre in Genesis 18, Abraham speaks to them as if they were regular humans, because that's what he thinks they are. Angel, in both Hebrew and Greek, simply means messenger, or envoy. We used the regular Danish word for envoy, udsending, and were happy with it. But when we then joined our work with the corresponding free translation of the New Testament from 2007, we saw that the apostles were called udsendinge. That meant that we had to use another word, to avoid confusion. So, we reluctantly changed all instances to the Danish word for angel.

We would also not use the term Levite but rather call them 'helpers to the priests', well, except for when the point is that it was someone from the tribe of Levi, in which case we would just say that.

Now, fear of God sounds and seems straightforward. But it certainly isn't. It's frequently talked about in the Hebrew biblical texts, and sometimes there is no doubt that it means real fear, as in e.g. Genesis 35:5 where the fear of God strikes the villages around Shechem so that they didn't pursue Jacob and his sons – or, rather his family as we say in Bibelen 2020, as it's clear that he was travelling with women too, even though they aren't explicitly mentioned in this verse. But have a look at Isaiah 8:13 where it says, according to the King James Version, sanctify the LORD of hosts himself, and let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. How should we understand that? Could it be that this fear of God is more akin to respect? We say yes, and we translate the verse, stick to me and show me respect.

Compare Genesis 22:12 where Abraham almost sacrificed his son Isaac on God's command. God says, lay not thine hand upon the lad…for now I know that thou fearest God. Did Abraham really try to sacrifice his son out of fear? Hardly. But he had incredible respect of God.

Another interesting case is Isaiah 11:2 where it says that the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. This last part, i.e. fear of God, we translate as 'love of God'. That could be taking the biblical concept of fear a bit too far but I stand by it. Love probably at least was an aspect of the Hebrew concept of fear of God.

We would also decide for the reader what words or expressions or texts mean, if they are ambiguous or not readily understandable. So, when e.g. God for no apparently very good reason kills two of Aaron the high priest's sons in Leviticus 10, I would have to come up with an understandable reason which we would then add to text. The text only says that they offered strange fire to God in the tabernacle. So I decided that they had made a cultic-technical mistake and were killed because they didn't obey God, which is a reasonable inference.

Another example is 2 Samuel 24 where it says that God again became angry with Israel and that he incited David against them and told him to go and take a census of the people. Counting the people of Israel and Judah turned out to be a great sin, even if it was God who told David to do it. So far so good. This behaviour from God is not unique in the bible and didn't need an explanation. However, it is baffling that taking a census would be such a terrible sin. So I had to come up with something. There were no very good solutions. I simply let Joab, David's military commander, say the following: God promised Abraham that there would be so many Israelites that they could not be counted, so if we perform a census, they would be counted. This is one possible explanation, but there's nothing in the text to indicate that. Anyway, I joke that it's now me who decides what the bible says.

As the project wore on, we became more and more daring and ambitious in creating a flowing and readable text, and we had also lost a lot of our natural restrain. The first text we worked on in 2013 was Ecclesiastes. We used it as a test case to find out how we would implement our principles. We agreed then that we couldn't do anything about obscure texts such as the saying in Ecc 11:1: Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days. It's a proverb, known from other sources in antiquity, but we are not sure about the deeper meaning of it.

But five years down line we decided, for better or worse, that we should also help the reader in such difficult cases, and so instead of saying anything about casting bread, we said: Be generous to ungrateful people because you will receive your reward at some point. At this point, we also decided to drastically shorten many of the genealogies in e.g. the books of Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. If you've looked at 1 Chronicles 1-9, you'll know what I mean. So when the Hebrew says that this person was the son of this person who was the son of this person etc. etc., we would say that this person, i.e. the first person mentioned, descended in a direct line from the last person mentioned, and simply deleting whatever names intervened, provided that we assumed that the first and last person were the important ones. If someone in the middle of the list was important, we would say that the first person descended in a direct line from the last person through this important person in the middle. In general we did a lot of simplification as the Hebrew texts love repetition and they love what we would consider unimportant details. This makes the texts so much more readable. The first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles are not too bad now, and the much-feared book of Leviticus is not so bad either.

We did avoid explaining certain obscure passages, such as Exodus 4:24-26 where God attacks Moses, and his wife Zippora saves the day by circumcising her son and touching the cut-off foreskin to Moses' genitalia, declaring Moses to be her bloody husband. Clearly Zippora is the heroine of the story, but it's hard to understand just what was going on. This one we did leave obscure.

With my relatively conservative scholarly background, I was initially frankly horrified about doing the aforementioned things to the text while still calling it a translation. But I was slowly won over by the merits of the idea behind the translation: making the bible available for new readers without much knowledge of Judaism or Christianity. Crucially, this translation was not supposed to replace the authorised Danish version from 1992, also published by the Danish Bible Society. Bibelen 2020 is just a very different type of translation, meant for a different audience. However, it turned out that many trained bible readers prefer the new version because it speaks to them in a different way, myself included. Why read a literal, cumbersome version, when you can read a beautiful version, written in your own normal language?

The famous bible translator and theoretician Eugene Nida coined the term functional equivalence in the 1960s. His theories form the theoretical basis for the trend to translate bibles very freely. In a book with de Waard from 1986, they put it like this:

> A translation should faithfully reflect who said what to whom under what circumstances and for what purpose and should be in the form of the receptor language which does not distort the content or mis-represent the rhetorical impact or appeal (de Waard & Nida 1986, 40).

We stuck to this principle in most cases, except for some shocking sexual language, which I'll come back to. So as we see it, we didn't distort the content but tried to present it so that it could be understood. Clearly, when words were written for an Israelite audience a few thousand years ago, we can't expect them to be readily understandable by an untrained bible reader today. And by avoiding footnotes and simply putting explanations into the text, some of us did feel that we were cheating at first, but at least we're open about what we've done. And I have to say that this bible reads well.

Now, internal contradictions in the texts are very common. This is very likely a result of the complex way they grew, which is extremely interesting but not within the scope of this paper. In traditional translations these contradictions and the strange ways that the narrative flow is broken are quite apparent. But for this translation, we would try to make sense of the texts as we have them and how God-fearing people have tried to understand them. I would put aside that part of me that is used to seeing signs of different layers and authors and editors in the text and would become the pious reader trying to make sense of God's word. I would glue disparate text fragments together by adding explicating editorial remarks and creating a better sense and a better flow. In this way I tried to improve on the crude editorial work by the original compilers or editors. In doing so I sought help in the books of very conservative scholars explaining how the texts might be read so that they don't contradict each other and have a nice logical flow.

Let me return to some of the concrete problems. Many terms were difficult and we would mull over them for years, bringing them up again and again at our meetings. Some terms were not so difficult as one might imagine. For instance, I've mentioned Aaron the high priest. This is ypperstepræst in Danish, much less directly intelligible than high priest in English. However, we concluded that terms for offices foreign to modern Western society could sound archaic without confusing readers, so we kept the ypperstepræst. There was no danger of misunderstanding there. But how about other types of military, religious, and community leaders? There are so many Hebrew (and Aramaic and even Persian) terms for these in the bible. For instance, there are several words for tribes, or clans, or larger or smaller families. These don't pose particular problems, but each of them had a leader or a head, and what to call those? We used the term 'leader' a lot, in addition to ad hoc solutions. We actually used 'leader' a lot more than we would have liked, and we tried hard to find good alternative options, but without much luck. And as for military ranks, the ancient Israelite ranks are just too different from ours to make sense. We had to make do with solutions like 'officer' or 'leader of such and such numbers of men'.

The ancient type of leader called judges in the bible (described in the Book of Judges) presents its own problems in a translation like this. Calling them 'judges' simply doesn't work because that was such a small part of what they did. We discussed this at length but never came up with anything better than 'leader'. Even for political leaders like princes we usually used the term 'leader', or 'leader of the people'. When Persian titles are used, we've translated with either '(high) officer' or 'governor'. The term 'official' also came in handy for various Hebrew job titles.

The term 'elder' turned out to pose a particularly thorny problem. In traditional bibles, you can find elders all of over the place and they never pose a problem for a translator, they are just always elders. But how to find a contemporary term for this semi-official, complex position? This may have been our longest-standing problem. A couple of times we thought we had the solution, and then implemented it throughout the texts, only to find out that it didn't work. Like when we used city council or village council, depending on the context. In the end we felt that the texts didn't work with such official terms, and throughout the years in the desert, these terms didn't make much sense. Other suggestions were 'the eldest and wisest', 'the respected citizens', 'the Israelites with a certain position in society', 'the elder council' – and let me point out that these terms sound better in Danish than in English ('de fremtrædende borgere', 'de mest fremtrædende israelitter', "alle israelitter med en vis position', 'de ældste og de klogeste', 'ældsterådet'). In the end we just said 'leaders of the people'. After a lot of hand-wringing, it turned out that we actually found a term that worked well. So, we had to give up conveying the fact that they were old, but the most important point is that they were community leaders.

The ark of the covenant doubled as the place where the two stone tablets with the law of Moses were kept (plus a pot of manna and Aaron's rod), and also as the throne of God. Like with Noah's ark, we normally use the term 'ark' in Danish for the ark of the covenant. This was another term that we discussed at our meetings over the years. It is a lot less complex than e.g. the elders since it's simply one object that doesn't change according to the context. But it is a complex object and it turned out to be impossible to find a contemporary Danish term that didn't have some kind of unfortunate connotation. The term that we ended up using is 'the chest with the holy agreement' even though 'chest', 'kiste' in Danish, also means 'coffin'.

I've mentioned Israel and Judah. Not only did we have to be careful to help the reader understand if the names referred to a person, an area or a people. The divided kingdom is a big deal in the bible, the schism between the two. They are often referred to as the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom, or Nordriget and Sydriget in Danish. These terms work pretty well, even though we felt them to sound a bit too archaic in Danish. Israel, as mentioned, is a difficult term, and in fact we ended up in a social media shitstorm for not using the term in certain places. People thought we were being anti-Semitic by 'omitting' Israel from the bible. For a long time we had 'North Israel' and 'South Israel', but again we were afraid that it was too easy to mix up with the modern state. So we had to go with the more archaic-sounding northern and southern kingdom.

Quite a few issues were fun and interesting. E.g. the modernisation of biblical systems for units of weight and length and volume. Words like bat, efa, and homer don't mean much to a non-Israelite, and even though we might have an idea of what a cubit is, it varied in length depending on when and where it was used in the bible. So we went metric, and it was up to me to do the research and the math. We got an approving and really funny article in the Danish paper for engineers with the headline: God has now gone metric, which focussed on the measurements for Noah's ark – or Noah's ship, as we call it in Bibelen 2020.

So, we were committed to give a faithful Danish representation of everything important the texts say, and how they say it. We were very careful not to 'distort the content or misrepresent the rhetorical

impact or appeal' as de Waard and Nida said above. I feel that we succeeded in almost all instances. The one clear exception is with explicit sexual language.

Let me explain the background for our problems with explicit sexual language in the bible by making clear what I'm not talking about. It's not a problem when Adam has intercourse with Eve or the daughters of Lot with their father. Two different expressions for having intercourse are used and present no problems. The Hebrew texts are often delicate in the way they express unmentionable acts, and euphemisms are common. So e.g. Adam knew Eve and she became pregnant.

It is also not a problem when male genitalia are talked about in more practical contexts. So in Leviticus, when describing that a man is unclean when he has discharge from his penis, we just use the word penis. Or in Deuteronomy, when it says: If a man's testicles are crushed or his penis is cut off, he shall not be admitted to the assembly of the Lord, this is perhaps painful to contemplate, but it is still in a somewhat matter-of-fact context, and we again just use the word penis.

Certain types of shocking language we also felt to be acceptable. Like the way Ezekiel uses the word 'whore' in chapters 16 and 23, and most of the long descriptions of the promiscuity of these women. Ezekiel and other prophets use quite shocking promiscuous sexual imagery at length as metaphors for the Israelite and Judahite worship of idols rather than God. The whole point of these metaphors is that they are shocking, and all modern translations of Ezekiel 16 and 23 that I'm aware of retain a good deal of the shocking imagery. Some use more polite words like prostitute, but the word 'whore' is clearly more reflective of the intention of the texts. So, there is a lot of whoring and fornication going on, and sexual practices are mostly described in a way that we still deemed ok. The whore is described as spreading her legs for everyone who passed by, and she had her firm breast fondled etc. etc., but we didn't feel we needed to censor that.

Nowhere is a dirty Hebrew word used for female genitalia, in which case we would have been in trouble. But we have some instances of harsh language for rape or intercourse and many instances of male genitalia being referred to in shocking contexts. Like in Ezekiel 23:20 where Judah the whore is lusting after penises that are large as donkeys' and ejaculating like horses. If we were to translate correctly, we should have used harsh language here and in a number of other places. We discussed it again and again and in the end the Bible Society decided that our bible shouldn't be known as the first one to use vulgar and tasteless words. So in this case we made the bible more suitable to read in a solemn context.

I had been tasked with translating the Book of Isaiah, and 57:8 again likens the people with a promiscuous woman, and one of the things she does is to look admiringly at her lovers' penises. In my initial draft translation, I made a long note about how I felt that the context allowed for only one choice of word for penis in Danish, and that's not a very delicate or polite word. I felt and wrote that it would be strange to see such a word in a bible, but in order to stay true to our objective, I saw no way out.

It turned out that there were other options for obtaining a good text, even if we had to abandon our otherwise good principles. We said in the end that she admired her lover's naked body. A pretty good solution, I think. In similar ways we euphemised our way out of the other male genital quandaries.

Similarly, we toned down the shocking word for having intercourse. In the case of the regular word for rape, this didn't need censoring, but Hebrew had a stronger word for intercourse and rape, shagal, that even the early rabbis said was not to be read aloud (even if it remained part of the consonantal Hebrew text). There are some indications that the word meant anal intercourse and anal rape (see Pinker 2009). Anyway, since a euphemism had been used from very early on in reading the text, we felt ok with using a euphemism in Danish too.

According to the King James Version, David in 1 Sam 25:22 refers to any that pisseth against the wall, meaning all the men of his opponents' family. A few times in the Hebrew bible, men are referred to with this crude term. Many bible translations euphemistically say 'men' or 'male', but some do translate literally. We just went with males. And in 2 Kings 18:27 we hear a soldier say, among other things, that they may eat their own dung, and drink their own piss, again according to the King James Version. The language is the harsh language expected from a soldier. We also toned it down and used polite terms. I should add that the English word 'piss' was in no way offensive in 1611, only much later did it develop into a vulgar term. But one does wake up when coming across this term in King James Version.

Final comments

Many of my translator colleagues and I had the same experience, that our initial draft of a translation is hard to recognise in the final product. Almost all our choices of interpretation were kept and can be recognised in Bibelen 2020, but the Danish that we initially used was really just a way to get the ball rolling. In my case, the final product is a lot better than the more traditional wording that I tended to use.

I feel honoured and happy that I got to take part in this project, in spite of sometimes having to come to painful compromises. Very challenging and interesting for a long time, not least thanks to working together with the best and most knowledgeable people in Denmark.

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