



LUND UNIVERSITY

Review of Translating the New Testament: Text, Translation, Theology.

Nylund, Jan

Published in:

Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism

2011

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Nylund, J. (2011). Review of Translating the New Testament: Text, Translation, Theology. *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism*, 8, R20-R28.

Total number of authors:

1

General rights

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

J · G · R · Ch · J



JOURNAL OF GRECO-ROMAN CHRISTIANITY AND JUDAISM

BOOK REVIEW

Stanley E. Porter and Mark J. Boda (eds.). *Translating the New Testament: Text, Translation, Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009). xvi + 360 pp. Pbk. US\$27.36.

Translating the New Testament is a volume based on contributions from a colloquium on Bible translation held over three days at McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario. Except for the introduction, the volume is divided into four parts: Text; Translation; Theology; and Text, Translation, and Theology. Except for the main contributions in these four subsections, each contributor was asked to apply their hermeneutical framework to a New Testament pericope, Lk. 16.19-31 (Lazarus and the rich man). These are placed at the end of each subsection and I will not comment on them further.

In his introductory chapter, ‘Translating the New Testament: An Introduction to Issues of Text, Translation, and Theology’, Stanley E. Porter points out that translation is a broader concept than we usually think; there is not only interlingual translation—that is, what we usually refer to as translation—but there is also intralingual translation (rewording in the same language) as well as semiotic translation (film). Porter addresses important issues related to the issues dealt with in the subsections of the volume.

Porter first discusses matters related to the *text*. Before doing anything else the translator is faced with two issues. The first concerns text-types, which are broadly divided into Byzantine (the traditional text used in translation) and the Alexandrian text-type (in particular known through the established eclectic text), which has become predominant. The second issue relates to the principles drawn upon in the adjudication of specific variant readings. Porter underlines four points of concern in the debate on textual criticism. First, there is still much more work to be done in comparing and analysing manuscripts, and how they are used in New Testament critical editions. Secondly, misunderstandings regarding positions that oppose one’s own position

frequently result in stereotypic evaluations. Thirdly, the adjudication of textual variants needs to be developed towards taking into account the criteria of the ‘larger variant context’. Fourthly, evaluation of whether a single manuscript could be used in translation should be considered. However, the question is what would be achieved by this approach. Admittedly, we would get a translation based on a text that was actually used by a group of Christians at a point in history—but would we have a translation that would be closer to the original text than a translation based on the eclectic text of NA²⁷/UBS⁴? Probably not.

Porter then deals with matters related to *translation* and points to the vital importance of addressing the issue of translation theory proper, which is a fairly recent discipline. The focus of attention in the discussion has often been limited to the opposition of formal and dynamic equivalence as well as the too simplistic opposition of stressing either the original writer or the modern reader. Of recent, several new factors have entered the translational matrix. Among these are the exploration of linguistic factors, contextual considerations and attention to a number of extra-biblical factors. Finally, Porter discusses the relationship between translation and *theology*. Within the ambit of translation issues, theology could be described as ‘the silent guest’, always present in the practice of translation. Porter notes that ‘translation itself is not a theory-neutral enterprise but demands serious methodological awareness and critical reflection’. Central issues here are the relationship between particular linguistic features and theological concepts, the relation between the Old and New Testaments (an issue even instanced in the translation of the Old Testament in the original New Testament texts themselves), and the presence of ‘pressure point-issues’ (that may not have been the same for the ancients as for modern readers) and how these relate to a faithful rendition of the original text as well as the modern context.

Barbara Aland contributes the first chapter in Part One, on *Text*. In ‘New Testament Textual Research, its Methods and its Goals’, she traces the history of the Institute of New Testament Textual Research and accounts for the usage of the terms *original text*, *initial text* (close to but not identified with the original text) and *established text* (corresponds to a ‘hypothetical reconstruction of the initial text’). Aland notes the value of the proximity of the earliest texts and text fragments to the initial text. As to the early papyri, Aland states that, after having followed the four-step method of collating the papyrus

text, comparing it with the hypothetical initial text (NA²⁷, GNT⁴), comparing it with manuscripts with the same readings and analysing the difficulties of text that might influence ‘the quality of the papyrus manuscripts’, ‘nearly all papyri can be traced to the initial text’. She also accounts for the methods used for handling the great mass of later manuscripts. Local stemmata are constructed, where variants are ranked as ‘predominantly prior or predominantly posterior’ and Aland concludes that the hypothetical initial text brings us close to the original text. With regard to the role of the scribe, Aland notes the generally fine quality of manuscripts produced by documentary scribes. Aland also suggests that minor differences between manuscripts may have been regarded as inconsequential and trivial by the early communities using the texts since these differences would not change the meaning of the text.

Maurice A. Robinson, in ‘Rule 9, Isolated Variants, and the “Test-Tube” Nature of the NA²⁷/UBS⁴ Text: A Byzantine-Priority Perspective’, criticizes the close to consensus view that the NA²⁷/UBS⁴ text represents ‘the epitome of New Testament text-critical scholarship’ and asserts that there are more than 100 whole verses in the NA²⁷ edition with no clear support in the tradition of the Greek manuscripts. Robinson critiques the text that results from the piecing together of disparate variant readings and that therefore mirror a sequence of readings that do not have any solid existence in history. As an alternative hypothesis, Robinson suggests that the Byzantine Textform may be a tradition with a pre-fourth-century history. He argues that since more than 100 whole verses lack solid support in the earliest manuscripts, the Byzantine Textform should be drawn upon instead. Robinson even goes so far as to question whether ‘the presumed *Ausgangstext* (NA²⁷/UBS⁴/ECM) ever could have existed in actuality’. Since the superior (from a transmissional perspective) Byzantine Textform has a definite historical existence, Robinson maintains that it should have a greater potential for actually having preserved ‘a pre-existing archetype’ as opposed to the ‘test-tube text’ of NA²⁷/UBS⁴. Robinson’s suggestion may be worth further consideration.

In his chapter on ‘The Significance of the Papyri in Revising the New Testament Greek Text and English Translations’, Philip Comfort deals with four main issues: first, the influence of papyri on considerable changes in the Greek standard text from Westcott and Hort; secondly, in what way the papyri have served to affirm substantial

alterations that have been opted for by Westcott and Hort and then by Nestle-Aland; thirdly, in what way he thinks that papyri should affect additional changes in Nestle-Aland; fourthly, the divided testimony of the papyri. Comfort provides quite a few illustrative examples where he analyses variant readings. He concludes that Lk. 8.43, 22.43-44, 23.34 and Jn 7.53–8.11 should be omitted from NA²⁷/UBS⁴ and that Mt. 21.44 and Jn 9.38-39a should be double-bracketed. Such a decision on the part of the Nestle-Aland/UBS committees would embolden translators to produce more accurate translations. Comfort also suggests that a way to denote equally supported readings should be introduced into the textual apparatus.

Part two, *Translation*, is introduced by Stanley E. Porter's 'Assessing Translation Theory: Beyond Literal and Dynamic Equivalence'. Porter notes that the considerable influence of Eugene Nida has dominated the discussion to such an extent that even today it is related to the literalist/dynamic equivalence dichotomy. With reference to the rich annotation of the Greek New Testament text in the OpenText.org project, Porter takes as his point of departure a graphic diagram, ranging from the smallest unit, that of the word and its morphology, to the most sweeping, the context of culture. Within *literalist translation*, Porter argues that in the KJV, RSV, NRSV, NASB, ESV and HCSB, the primary concern has been with the level of the word, one-to-one correspondence and iconicity of meaning and form. Nida's Good News Translation (GNT) paved the way for *dynamic equivalence* translation, instanced by the CEV, NIV, TNIV and New Living Translation, where analysis of the kernel of a construction in the source language is transferred to the equivalent kernel in the target language and then idiomatically rendered in the surface structure. Porter notes that dynamic equivalence translations have much in common with literalist translations, both theoretically and practically. The *functionalist* approach draws on Hallidayan linguistics, further developed by, among others, J.C. Catford and Peter Newmark, and strives to make the target language equivalent to the source language, though with a stronger orientation towards the rank of the clause complex than in functional equivalence. The significance of *discourse analysis* has not yet been sufficiently drawn upon, though Hatim and Mason have addressed the issue in two books. This approach is concerned with elements above the sentence level and builds on Hallidayan linguistics and its concept of register, and focuses on translation as communication. Placing

register analysis in the linguistic context of pragmatics, Hatim and Mason note the intricate interaction between communication, semiotics and pragmatics. *Relevance theory*, though not really a translation theory in itself, is an application of Sperber and Wilson's cognition theories to translation by Ernst-August Gutt, going out from the human expectation that an attempted interpretation will result in 'adequate contextual effects at minimal processing cost', or, in other words, a maximal understanding for a minimum of effort. The *descriptivist approach* seeks to assess translation from the viewpoint of 'its literary function in the receptor culture'. Last among the theories mentioned is the *Postcolonial theory* that in particular is a criticism of Nida's equivalence model. Lawrence Venuti argues that Nida is not aware of 'the ethnocentric violence that is inherent in every translation process'. Finally, Porter draws attention to the respective weakness of each translation theory and suggests some future prospects. Among other things, Porter suggests that what is needed is a 'coordinated method of translation', where the translation task is divided up as described in the functionalist approach and that the translation procedure takes into account not only the level of the clause complex but also the level of the paragraph as well the discourse level. Other aspects to be included are the situation context and the cultural context.

In 'A Translation that Includes a Reading Experience: Narrativity, Intratextuality, Rhetorical Performance, and Galatians 1–2', Alain Gignac starts out describing a translation project, *Bible, nouvelle traduction* (BNT), where the translation procedure involved a pair (an exegete and a secular author), being assigned to cooperatively translate a section of the Bible. For Alain Gignac and the agnostic writer Marie Depussé, the cooperation resulted, among other things, in the replacement of words such as faith, gospel, glory, spirit, baptism and apostle with adherence/faithfulness, message, splendour, breath, immersion and envoy. The word *faith* was avoided in particular because, Gignac contends, 'it narrows the semantic field', it is loaded with 2000 years of Christian history and because it 'induces a false sense of security in the reader'. A subjective understanding of πίστις Χριστοῦ was also favoured. Renewal of the language should definitely be a key issue in any new translation in making the gospel available to an ever-changing world, but Gignac's approach seems to border on dechristianizing the gospel by the replacement of key concepts with sometimes vague alternatives that blur rather than clarify the message.

In a second section, pushing aside the historical-critical approach to the text just a little, Gignac favours a direct contact with, or immersion in, the Greek text. In the third section, Gignac applies his synchronic approach to Galatians 1–2. Gignac comments that the task of the translator is ‘to render...not so much the text’s ideas as its images and semantic potentialities’. Gignac rightly concludes that his theoretical approach is ‘provocatively qualified as (post)modern’. To Gignac, novelty and avant-gardism seems to be more imperative than authenticity and faithfulness to the original text.

In ‘Hebrews 10.32-39 and the Agony of the Translator’, Luke Timothy Johnson draws attention to the challenges of translations, using a passage in Hebrews as a case study.

Part Three, which was supposed to be a section on the relation between theology and translation, is the weakest part of the volume. There is, it seems, only one chapter that strictly deals with this topic: Francis Watson’s ‘Mistranslation and the Death of Christ: Isaiah 53 LXX and its Pauline Reception’. Therefore a brief mention will have to suffice with regard to the other contributions in this subsection: Edith M. Humphrey’s contribution with the mysterious title ‘On Probabilities, Possibilities, and Pretexts: Fostering a Hermeneutics of Sobriety, Sympathy, and Imagination in an Impressionistic and Suspicious Age’, ‘An Intertextual Reading of Moral Freedom in the Analects and Galatians’, by K.K. Yeo, who draws on Julia Kristeva’s concept of intertextuality to involve himself in the risky business of trying to combine a Confucian Chinese identity with a Christian one, and Elsa Tamez’s ‘A Latin American Rereading of Romans 7’.

Francis Watson argues that Paul in his Christian usage of Isaiah 53 LXX depends on ‘statements that seem to deviate from and mistranslate the probable underlying Hebrew’, or, in other words, that Paul depends on a mistranslation of the Hebrew text. Watson points out that a translation in representing the original text also displaces it and notes the problem with the view of the LXX as an ‘inspired text’ with an independent authority. After having drawn detailed attention to where the Isaiah 53 LXX text deviates from the MT, Watson concludes that precisely those points of non-agreement were vital for Paul. Watson highlights in translation into English where the LXX text deviates from the MT and then analyses Paul’s use of Isa. 52.15 in Rom. 15.21 and Isa. 53.1 in Rom. 10.16. Isaiah 52.15 LXX in translation reads: ‘For *those to whom* it was not announced *concerning him shall see*, and

those who have not heard will understand’ (Watson’s translation), where ‘shall see’ and ‘will understand’ are in the future tense in LXX, whereas the MT has these verbs in the perfect. Here, therefore, Watson argues that Paul depends on ‘Greek rewording’, which, according to Watson, does not agree with the MT reading. However, it is striking that Watson does not even take into consideration the frequent use of the so-called prophetic perfect in the prophetic writings of the Old Testament, as mentioned in standard Hebrew grammars, such as those by Waltke and O’Connor, and Van der Merwe. This understanding of the two perfects in v. 15 would neutralize Watson’s argument. Towards the end of his chapter, Watson finally discusses a few soteriologically important key phrases from Isaiah 53 LXX that Paul makes use of: ‘for us/for our sins’, ‘given up’, and ‘humbled himself’. Watson asserts that without the ‘for us’ (περὶ ἡμῶν) ‘there would be no basis for the claim that what took place in Christ’s death took place “for us”’. However, even a cursory reading of Isaiah 53 MT would make the vicarious sense of Christ’s death clear enough even without the ‘for us’. In other words, Paul does draw on the περὶ ἡμῶν of the LXX in Isaiah 53, but is not dependent on it since the notion of ‘for us’ can easily be drawn from the context. A similar logic can be applied to Watson’s other key phrases. Therefore, when Watson concludes that ‘It is mistranslation that makes it possible to affirm that Christ died for us, or that he died for our sins’, he is clearly overstating his case. Even though Paul made use of the precise wording of Isaiah 53 LXX, his theology is sufficiently supported by the MT. Watson’s contribution contains quite a few noteworthy and valid observations, but he fails to interpret their significance adequately and rigorously in the overall context.

Part Four, on *Text, Translation and Theology*, consists of a single contribution that comes forth as an orphan chapter. Since the chapter to a great extent deals with the history of the text of the Greek New Testament, it would have fitted well early in Part One, *Text*. Nevertheless, Richard N. Longenecker’s chapter, entitled ‘*Quo vadis? From Whence to Where in New Testament Text Criticism and Translation?*’, is well worth reading. Longenecker first traces the history of the text itself. During the patristic period, ranging from Clement of Rome in the first century to Augustine in the mid-400s, the New Testament text was standardized. During the reformation period, Erasmus, on the basis of a few twelfth- and thirteenth-century Byzantine manuscripts, produced a critical edition of the New

Testament Greek text that was used not only for Luther's translation but also for Tyndale's and the King James translation of 1611. Longenecker describes the modern critical period in three phases. Phase one includes the break with the *Textus Receptus* by Karl Lachmann in 1830, access to Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus, Westcott and Hort's publication of *The New Testament in the Original Greek* in 1881 and delineation of the three text families derived from their work. Phase two includes the development of form criticism and redaction criticism primarily by Martin Dibelius, Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Ludwig Schmidt, and the attention these methods brought to the *internal features* of the text, such as authorial intention, style and theology, as well as *external features* related to manuscripts and text families in text-critical judgments. Phase three comprises a revolutionary re-evaluation of the New Testament's textual history launched by Kurt and Barbara Aland, which has placed an emphasis on the early manuscripts of the second and third centuries, as demonstrated in the textual apparatus of NA²⁷/UBS⁴, where the papyri appear first, followed by uncials, minuscules and then versions, church Fathers and lectionaries.

Translation through history, integral to that of textual history, is also traced by Longenecker from the patristic period to the Reformation and then to the modern critical period. Towards the end of the second century, the New Testament started to be translated into Latin in the west and Syriac and Coptic in the east. In 405 Hieronymus (Jerome) presented his new Latin translation, the Vulgate, which was partly based on Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus. During the Reformation Luther, emphasizing Scripture over against church tradition, the need for people to be able to read the Bible for themselves and the general acceptance of Erasmus's critical edition of the New Testament, translated the New Testament into German, published as the *Septembertestament* in 1522. Other translations followed suit, and in 1611 scholars from Westminster, Oxford and Cambridge published the King James Version. All Protestant translations up till then were based on four or five late Byzantine manuscripts (Erasmus's text). In the modern critical period, five factors came together to inspire new translations: a desire to reach people of other cultures and languages, a need to go back to the roots of Christianity, the formation of a more adequate Greek text, new linguistic data and insights, and the fact of the constant change of receptor languages. Eugene Nida has definitely been the

most significant catalyst for providing a solid framework for Bible translation through his meaning-based theory. For the future, Longenecker, among other things, warns against allowing any translation to gain the same fossilized status as the Vulgate and the King James Version. We should rather always move on, improving our translations and making them relevant in every new era.

Translating the New Testament. Text, Translation, Theology is a solid and varied contribution to and reflection on the challenging and rewarding task of translating the New Testament in our time. It brings to our attention the potential and need for development and improvement in the translation of the New Testament, both in theory and practice.

Jan Nylund
McMaster Divinity College