

Harry Freedman, *The Murderous History of Bible Translations. Power, Conflict and the Quest for Meaning* (London – Oxford – New York – New Delhi – Sydney: Bloomsbury 2016). Pp. 248. £ 20. ISBN 978-1-4729-2167-3

### JAKUB WARDEGA

Faculty of Modern Languages, Warsaw University, Poland  
 e-mail: jakub.wardega@wp.pl  
 ORCID: 0000-0003-0130-4754

Harry Freedman is a Jewish academic with a PhD in Aramaic, whose publications are, among others, concerned with the Bible and the Talmud. His book *The Murderous History of Bible Translations: Power, Conflict and the Quest for Meaning* tells the story of Bible translation taking into account the emotion and controversy involved in the process of creating subsequent versions. It also looks at translators who were ready to devote their life to helping others read the Word of God. Some of them sacrificed their life for what they believed in. Yet, as the author states in the introduction, the book does not purport to constitute a full story of Bible translation.

The author strived to order the book's thirteen chapters chronologically, beginning in the 3rd century BC with the Septuagint and its controversies, and finishing in the second decade of the 2000s AD with Wycliffe Bible Translators' Bible for Muslims, and its own controversies. However, while maintaining chronology, he often diametrically changes the locations where the described events take place. The book consists of three parts, suggestively named "Before the Violence," "The Violence Begins," and "Enlightenment," each presenting a different period within the era of controversy in Bible translation.

The first part begins with a recollection of the legend concerning the creation of the Septuagint, which maintains that seventy (or seventy two, depending on its version) Jewish scholars allegedly produced a perfect translation of the Torah<sup>1</sup> into Greek for Ptolemy II, the king of Egypt. Then, the author describes

<sup>1</sup> It ought to be mentioned here that even though the name "Septuagint" is popularly used among Christians at present to mean the translation of the whole Old Testament into Greek, the author points out that the books translated at first were those of the Pentateuch. It was only with time that the sum of Greek translations of the Jewish sacred scriptures, created across a few centuries, came to be called "Septuagint" among the Jews and especially among Christians. See also A. Pietersma – B.G. Wright (ed.), *A New English Translation of the Septuagint and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included under That Title* (New York: Oxford University Press 2007) xiii.

the history of the Septuagint with regard to both Judaism and Christianity. In Judaism it was superseded by other translations, following the changes within Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD and the controversy with Christians. In Christianity, the Vulgate won the struggle for supremacy – not without internal resistance and controversy. Describing the Jewish rabbis' opposition to the Septuagint, the author notes the first occurrence of the phenomenon of religious leaders opposing Scripture translation, so as to prevent its unorthodox understanding. It will recur many times in the history of the Bible.

After this, the author retells the story of how the Holy Scriptures became translated from Hebrew into Aramaic. The process had begun even before the destruction of the Second Jewish Temple and was caused by the fact that Aramaic became the main language used by the Jews after the Babylonian captivity. Here also the author sees a similar case of controlling Bible translation by religious leaders with rabbis instituting rules concerning the reading of Aramaic Targums in Synagogues which were used simultaneously to the original Hebrew writings.

The story of the Aramaic Bible is followed by the creation of the first translations of the New Testament into Syriac, beginning in the 2nd century AD, and the whole Bible in Latin (Jerome's Vulgate, 4th c.), Gothic (Ulphilas's Codex Argenteus, 4th c.) and Armenian (by Mesrop Mashtots and Sahak of Armenia, 4-5th c.). Probably the most impressive are the stories of Ulphilas and Mesrop, who both had to invent an alphabet before they were able to render the Bible into their languages. One may also find entertaining the accounts of Jerome's life and creation of the Vulgate, and be amused at the story of people believing that Syriac is the original version of the New Testament, not a translation.

Subsequently, the author takes the reader to the end of the 8th century, following the advent of Islam, when the renowned translator Hunayn Ibn Ishāq, a Christian, translated part of the Bible to be placed in the House of Wisdom, a library in Baghdad in which Muslim rulers purported to collect and translate into Arabic every Greek book on philosophy, mathematics, and science. Freedman also tells the story of Saadia Gaon, one of the foremost rabbis of his time, who in the 10th c. translated parts of the Old Testament into Arabic to be able to defend the validity of the text which was disputed by Muslims. This is followed by a reference to Alcuin, a monk who influenced Charlemagne to allow for a translation of the Bible into German to teach it to the conquered nations. Freedman ends the first part of the book, recounting the efforts of Cyril and Methodius who, similarly to Ulphilas and Mesrop, had to invent a new alphabet in order to translate the Bible into Slavonic and convert the Slavs to Christianity.

Part two of the book begins with the 'fateful,' faithful translation into English by Aelfric, an Anglo-Saxon monk, of Exodus 35:34 from Jerome's Vulgate. In his rendering, when Moses came from Mount Sinai, his face "gehyrned," that

is, “[was] horned” (p. 73). Freedman concludes that this, especially when the first illuminated versions of the manuscript were circulated, has influenced the perception of the Jews even until now. Subsequently, the story follows the vernacular Bible used by the Christian Cathar sect in its disputes with the Church and the ensuing ban on popular reading of the Scripture by the Council of Toulouse in 1229 to prevent heresy, as well as the bloody annihilation of the sect. This account is followed by the story of Marguerite Porete, a beguine executed for heresy in 1310, who had used the Bible in Gaelic for preaching, and of the early reformers John Wycliffe and Jan Hus, both of whom translated the Bible (into English and Czech, respectively) and were deemed heretics. The latter was burned at stake in 1415. The author then tells the reader about Johann Reuchlin, a Hebraist who authored aids for studying Hebrew, and Martin Luther who started the Protestant Reformation in 1517. Luther first published his translation of the New Testament into German, completed in ten weeks, in 1522, which was followed by his rendering of the Old Testament which it took much longer to produce. Luther’s Bible became a bestseller.

The author then gives an account of the life and legacy of William Tyndale. The chapter begins with an account of his unsuccessful search for a patron in England, who would support the task of translating and printing the Bible in English. Then the narrative follows him in his travel to Germany, where he completed the task in hiding and had his work printed. Not having accepted Henry VIII’s offer of pardon, Tyndale was betrayed and burned in Antwerp at the order of the Holy Inquisition in 1536. Yet, his Bible, which was finished and printed by his collaborator Miles Coverdale, was used officially in the Church of England by decree of Henry VIII from 1539.

Freedman then proceeds to the publication of certain of the first Catholic vernacular Bibles in Europe, one of which was the Rheims-Douay New Testament of 1582. At the time the Catholic Church ceased considering publishing Bibles for masses a crime. Nevertheless, people would still be punished for their views. For example, Antonio Brucioli, a Catholic, was sentenced to prison for his sympathy for Protestantism expressed in the commentaries published alongside his Bible in Italian. Also Sebastien Châteillon’s (French), Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples’s (French), and Jacob van Liesveldt’s (Dutch) translations were stigmatised and/or burned because of their authors’ unorthodox views. Liesveldt was also beheaded. Finally, in 1559, the use of translated Holy Scripture was again prohibited by the Pope. Apart from that, the Spanish Inquisition also destroyed copies of the Old Testament to prevent Spanish Jews converted (often by force) to Christianity from practising Judaism. The author follows this with a report on translations made at the time for the Jews into Ladino and Yiddish, and a narrative of the Munster Revolt of 1534-1535, in which a perverted understanding of the Bible

had a share – especially that the Holy Scripture was the sole book used by the Anabaptists who took control of the town.

Freedman closes the second part of the book with a description of how the King James's Bible became "the" English Bible (p. 141). King James I intended it to be a revision of the Bishops' Bible, composed by people from different denominations (with the use of previous translations including Tyndale's) – to ensure that everyone would accept it and thus to "dethrone" the anti-royalist Geneva Bible. Subsequently, the book describes the reactions to it following the publication: it was not received well at first, especially when the country was run by Oliver Cromwell and later by the Catholic Queen Mary; yet, finally it won the competition with the Geneva Bible and gained lasting renown.

In the third part of the book, Freedman's narrative continues with the life of Moses Mendelssohn, a Jewish Philosopher living in Germany who promoted the integration of the Jews, living in Diaspora until then in self-established ghettos, with the rest of the society. To achieve this aim, he translated the Pentateuch into German and published it with a Jewish commentary despite opposition from the traditionalists. The publication helped the Jews learn German, and then served as a device connecting German-using Jews with their own religion.

Freedman's narrative makes one almost dizzy when he jumps from place to place in subsequent chapters. For instance, at this point, he goes from Germany to America and proceeds to describe the translation of the Psalms completed in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1640, which he says was the first case of translating and printing a text in North America. It was published because the Pilgrims who lived in the Colony did not want to share the book of Psalms for singing with the Puritans living in Plymouth near them, who already had one. It was followed by the first complete Bible for the Native Americans rendered into Algonquian and printed in 1663. Freedman also describes the first translation of the Old Testament from the Septuagint into English made by Charles Thomson, one of the leaders of the American Revolution. It was published in 1808, but would not become popular. That account is followed with that of Noah Webster's revision of the Authorised Version from 1833, and the first Bible made by a woman, Julia Smith. She translated from Latin and the original languages for herself between 1845-1860 and published her work years later as a means of proving the male authorities of her town Glastonbury, who treated her as worse than its male inhabitants, that a woman was capable of such a task.

These stories are followed with a recounting of the causes which led to the revision of the King James Bible and the subsequent publication of the Revised Version in 1885, as well as the controversy related to the latter. Then, the author relates the events connected, among others, to politics, including a struggle with Church authorities in Russia, which resulted in the publication of the Synodal

Bible in Russian in 1876. This is, however, only an interjection before the story continues with a reference to the Revised Version in the USA and the cycle of controversy and further calls for revision, whose fruit were the Revised Standard Version of 1952 and later the New American Standard Bible of 1971. A similar situation in Britain resulted in the making of the New English Bible of 1970, again not well-received. Freedman then refers to Bibles translated for the Jews into German, English, and other modern languages, and discusses the mixed receptions of the Catholic French (1956) and English (1966) Jerusalem Bibles, and the English New Jerusalem Bible of 1985. Importantly, though, these Catholic Bibles were all translated primarily from the original languages instead of the Vulgate after the Pope allowed doing this in 1943.

After this, Freedman focuses on modern evolutions of translation policies. First, he recounts the use of Eugene Nida's dynamic equivalence in composing Bibles with gender-inclusive language – first introduced in the New Jerusalem Bible and later in the New Revised Standard Version of 1990 and others. The author also mentions the Queen James Bible, whose authors he believes to have gone so far as to change the eight verses from the King James Version related to homosexuality to suit their ideological agenda. Afterwards, he also describes “eccentric” (p. 206) English Bibles translated by messianic Jews. Finally, he recounts the furious response by Protestant churches following Wycliffe Bible Translators' publication of a New Testament for proselytising Muslims in 2011. They accused the organisation of changing the Word of God once they learned of the translation procedures used in its preparation, such as changing expressions like “Son of God” into “beloved son who comes from God” (p. 208).

At the end, the author attempts to summarise important threads elaborated on, such as the relationship of religion and power and the role of emotion in people's attitude towards the Bible. He also tries to answer the question of what the future of Bible translation will be.

One significant characteristic of the book is that it offers an outline of the relationship of the history of the Jewish nation and the texts of the Scripture through the ages. This includes stories of how the Church (looking at both the Catholic and Protestant side) as well as secular authorities in the so-called Christian countries treated them, often in a shameful manner. For example, it presents Luther's attitude towards the *sola scriptura* principle from the point of view of his prejudice against Jewish beliefs. Thus, the book might be for one an useful, basic introduction into – and a source of ideas for further studies in – this field, even though one may feel that certain pieces of information relating to the Jews have smaller relevance to its main theme.

As far as the content is concerned, while outlining the history of the King James Bible, the author could have, perhaps, mentioned the influence exerted

on it by the Rheims-Douay New Testament, which has been proved by research.<sup>2</sup> He could have also referred in one of the chapters to the fact that even though numerous translations have been published since the Authorised Version, it has arguably remained the most frequently used Bible in the USA until today.<sup>3</sup> A minor point where I would disagree with the author is when, describing common people's knowledge of the scripture before Wycliffe as based on information given orally by the Church, he concludes that the punishment of being cast into fire in hell is not mentioned in the Bible (p. 82). In reality, such a reference is not hard to find in Mark 9:43 and Matthew 18:9.

Apart from this, in conclusion, *The Murderous History of Bible Translations: Power, Conflict and the Quest for Meaning* is a very useful publication for people interested in the history of Bible translation – both for academic purposes and also for reading for entertainment. The book is a testimony to the author's broad knowledge of the subject. It encompasses a concise, well-written, well-researched, and, importantly, readable summary of the influence of human passion on the production of Bibles across time and the sometimes violent effects (or causes) of this process. I would recommend it to both academics conducting research in any particular aspect of the Bible in history, as well as to people who would just like to know how the Bible in their hands came about.

## Bibliography

- Carleton J.G., *The Part of Rheims in the Making of the English Bible* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1902).  
 Crehan F.J., "The Bible in the Roman Catholic Church from Trent to the Present Day", *The Cambridge History of the Bible: The West from the Reformation to the Present Day* (ed. S.L. Greenslade) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008) 199-237.  
 Goff P. – Farnsley II A. – Thuesen. P., "The Bible in American Life", [http://www.raac.iupui.edu/files/2713/9413/8354/Bible\\_in\\_American\\_Life\\_Report\\_March\\_6\\_2014.pdf](http://www.raac.iupui.edu/files/2713/9413/8354/Bible_in_American_Life_Report_March_6_2014.pdf), 9 August 2017.  
 Pietersma A. – Wright B.G. (ed.), *A New English Translation of the Septuagint and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included under That Title* (New York: Oxford University Press 2007).

---

2 See J. Carleton, *The Part of Rheims in the Making of the English Bible* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1902). This work is also mentioned in F.J. Crehan, "The Bible in the Roman Catholic Church from Trent to the Present Day", *The Cambridge History of the Bible: The West from the Reformation to the Present Day* (ed. S.L. Greenslade) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008) 212.  
 3 See P. Goff – A. Farnsley II – P. Thuesen, "The Bible in American Life", [http://www.raac.iupui.edu/files/2713/9413/8354/Bible\\_in\\_American\\_Life\\_Report\\_March\\_6\\_2014.pdf](http://www.raac.iupui.edu/files/2713/9413/8354/Bible_in_American_Life_Report_March_6_2014.pdf).