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BIBLE TRANSLATION AS MEDIATOR OF HEBREW IMPACT ON TARGET LANGUAGES
The Estonian Bible Translation by Johannes Gutslaff

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The full version of the Bible was first published in Estonian in 1739. In comparison with the neighbouring Protestant countries this is a very late date: the first Swedish translation had appeared almost 200 years earlier (1541), the first Finnish translation almost 100 years (1642) and the first Latvian translation exactly 50 years earlier (1689). However, it is not only the late year of publication that distinguishes the Estonian Bible from the Bibles of the neighbouring countries, but also the source text of the translation. The Swedish, Finnish and Latvian Bibles have, in principle, been translated from Luther's German version (although the Latvian translator has apparently consulted the original text as well), whereas the Estonian Bible has been translated directly from the original languages, i.e. the Old Testament from Hebrew and Aramaic and the New Testament from Greek. There are no traces to indicate that the translator Anton Thor Helle even had Luther's version at hand when translating the text (Ross 1995a, 1995b).

By the time when the Estonian Bible was published, the historical situation around the Baltic Sea had changed significantly. As a result of the Great Northern War, Estonia had become a part of the Russian Empire. During the 18th century the dominating ideological trend in the Estonian Church was pietism. The Estonian spiritual life was especially strongly influenced by the movement of the United Brethren, practising an extreme branch of pietism, and the publication of the Estonian Bible is generally regarded as a cultural

event in the framework of pietism and the movement of the United Brethren (Põldmäe 1939). Considering those circumstances it is no wonder that the Estonian Bible of the 18th century should differ so much from its counterparts published in the neighbouring countries in the 16th and 17th centuries.

However, serious attempts to translate the Bible into Estonian were made in the 17th century already. There are two manuscripts from the 17th century which contain translations of the Old Testament. Both of them have survived only in part: one of them is interrupted after the first chapter of the First Book of Kings, the other after the third verse of the last chapter of the Book of Iob. Whether or not the translators actually completed their work is unknown. The first manuscript dates from the 1650s, the second one from the 1690s. An analysis of the translations indicates that the latter has been translated from Luther's German version (Ross 1997) and therefore it is of no interest in the present context. However, the first manuscript dating from the middle of the century has been – unlike the Finnish Bible published only a dozen years earlier – translated directly from Hebrew.

This translation is made into the South-Estonian language and on the grounds of the handwriting it has been proved to be written by Johannes Gutslaff (Tering 1979). As all Estonian intellectuals of the 17th century, Gutslaff was a German. He was born in Pomerania. His birthdate is unknown, but during the 1630s he studied at the universities of Greifswald and Leipzig. He came to Estonia probably at the end of the 1630s and was for some years connected with the University of Tartu. Since 1641 he served as the minister of the congregation of Urvaste in South-Estonia. In 1656 he fled to Tallinn in the face of war and died there of plague a year later *(ibid.)*.

In the history of the Estonian humanities Gutslaff is known first of all as the author of the first grammar book of the South-Estonian language. The book was published in 1648 and during the 20th century it has been twice reprinted as a facsimile-publication (in the recent publication – Gutslaff 1998 – an Estonian translation of the Latin text of the grammar and several appendixes are added).

Unlike that grammar book, Gutslaff's translation of the Old Testament has not attracted much interest on the part of Estonian linguists. Scholars have dealt only with the problems of the authorship of the manuscript; almost no attention has been paid to the contents and quality of the translation. However, even the first glance at the manuscript reveals several citations of Hebrew words together with comments mainly in Latin, sometimes in German. On the grounds of these comments it has been unanimously concluded that the text is a direct translation from Hebrew. Such a conclusion is supported by a letter by Gutslaff from 1648; in it he writes that he plans to translate the whole Bible from the original languages (Tering 1979).

I have analysed the translation of the 25th chapter of Genesis, the Second Chapter of the Book of Ruth and some shorter fragments from various other parts of the manuscript in order to find out, how faithful Gutslaff has been to the original text and whether he has used other translations available at that time (e.g. the Septuagint, the Vulgate, Luther's translation or the Finnish translation). As for the comments to Hebrew words and phrases, I have so far analysed the 68 remarks added to Genesis.

The most conspicuous technical feature of Gutslaff's translation is that his Estonian grammar bears very strong traces of German influence. This is characteristic of Estonian texts in the 17th century in general, since those were practically all written by Germans. Here, however, I should not make Gutslaff's Estonian my main concern; instead of it I should like to concentrate on how closely Gutslaff followed the phrase structure of the original text.

The material analysed by me enables us to conclude that Gutslaff normally translated word by word. A proof can be found in phrases standing in an one-to-one correspondence with those of the original source but differing in structure from Luther's versions. E.g. Gutslaff translated the phrase *wayhi aḥare mot Abraham* (Gen 25:11) as *Se sünni enge perrast Abrahammi surma* ('But it happened after the death of Abraham'), using a special element to render the *wayhi* form, which is a typical Hebrew sentence opening. Luther did not copy the Hebrew formula, producing a normal German phrase *Und nach dem Tode Abrahams.*[1]

At the same time it is obvious that throughout his work Gutslaff kept Luther's German version close at hand. This is proved, among other matters, by his comments, most of which consist of a Hebrew word or phrase and its Latin translation. In most cases such a comment is added to a word or phrase which Luther has translated inexactly. E. g. Luther has translated the phrase *ha-taḥat elohim anoki* (Gen 30:2) *Bin ich doch nicht Gott,* ignoring or omitting the word *taḥat.* Gutslaff translates more precisely: *Kas olle Minna sihs jumala assemel* ('Am I in God's place then?') and he adds the original phrase with its Latin translation: *Numquid ego sum dei loco?* This as well as other analogous examples suggest that Gutslaff considered necessary to argue in favour of his deviations from Luther's text in front of some possible controllers or correctors of his manuscript, a Bible Translation Commission perhaps which had the right to decide over the acceptability of the translation and which supposedly believed that the translation needed to be in a strict harmony with that of Luther.[2]

On the other hand, the manuscript offers a number of examples in which the source text should rather be sought in Luther's German version. The final verses (31–34) of Chapter 25, for instance, contain certain particles that are obviously not motivated by the original; however, they are easily explainable

on the basis of Luther's example. E.g. Gutslaff's translation of *wayyomer ya'aqob hiššabe'a lli kayyom* (Gen 25:33) reads *Jaakob lauss: Sihs, wannu Minnulle tähmba* ('Jacob said: So swear to me today'), which sounds quite close to Luther's version: *Jakob sprach: So schwöre mir heute.* Yet, the phrase structure of the majority of the sentences analysed by me seems to be based on the original text rather than on Luther's translation.

The following is an attempt to evaluate Gutslaff's translation and the first printed Estonian Bible (1739) in the context of Luther's theory of translation as well as of the history of literary Estonian.

As is widely known, Luther was of the opinion that a translator should not follow the structure of the source language; instead, he must use the fluent and pure target language. In his famous *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen* ('Open Letter on Translating') Luther writes: "We do not have to inquire of the literal Latin, how we are to speak German, as these asses do. Rather we must inquire about this of the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace. We must be guided by their language, the way they speak, and do our translation accordingly. That way they will understand it and recognize that we are speaking German to them." (Luther 1530)

Indeed, Luther's translation itself is regarded to be pure and idiomatic German with no traces of Latin, Hebrew or Greek in it. Today literary translators generally find Luther's method self-evident and try to reach his ideal: a target text which is as fluent and easily understandable as possible. But we must not forget that today the impact of translations of fiction on the target language is, in principle, very small and we cannot compare it with the role of the first Bible translations which often laid the foundation to the literary languages of the respective nations. They even had the potential to change the structure of the language which they often did.

In his book "Poétique du traduire" Henri Meschonnic writes: "The history [of translation] in Europe is marked by several erasures. Europe was born of translation and in translation. Europe is based on nothing but translations. She has established herself entirely by erasing the original of the translation. This holds for the basic texts of both of her two pillars which are Greek writings on science and philosophy and the biblical texts (the Old as well as the New Testament) written in Hebrew. The Hebrew origin has been totally overlooked by the Western religious and political history. As well that history could be called the history of a Christian-philological anti-Judaism."[3] Let us here leave the religious-political aspect aside and concentrate rather on the linguistic aspect of the erasure.

In Meschonnic's terms we could say that for Germans Luther erased the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. Although his criticism was aimed at the

Latin Vulgate and German translations which followed the Latin text word-by-word, his own method of translating also led to an erasure of the Hebrew original.

Speaking about the faithfulness or liberty of any given translation, there are two domains which we have to take into consideration: 1) differences between the grammatical structure of the source and target languages and 2) phraseology. The ignoring of the grammar of the source language by replacing it with the grammatical system of the target language is a normal matter for almost every translator, at least today. But as for phraseology, the situation is more complicated. The authors of those great Bible translations which laid the foundations of new cultures were in a particularly complicated situation. And we find ourselves in a complicated situation when trying to evaluate the way they solved the problem.

In principle, Luther consistently and purposely erased the idioms and expressions typical to the source language. For example, in his own comments to his translations of the Psalms Luther explains, why he has translated the phrase *kemo ḥeleb wa-dešen tišbaʿ nafši* ('my soul is filled as if with fat and fatness') (Ps 63:6) into German as *Das wäre meines Herzens Freude und Wonne.* Before Luther it had been translated in accordance with the Vulgate as *Laß meine Seele voll werden, wie mit Schmalz und Fett.* However, Luther argues that Germans do not connect *Schmalz und Fett* ('fat and fatness') with *Freude und Wonne* ('joy and pleasure') and that is why he has said 'joy and pleasure' instead of 'fat and fatness' (Luther 1533). This explanation is quite logical and reasonable, but with his way of translating Luther also deprived the Germans of an opportunity to develop a connection between 'fat and fatness' and 'joy and pleasure'. Bible translations had the potential to develop such connections, this way enriching the target languages with new idioms and expressions.

The Swedish, Finnish and Estonian Bible translators have (indeed!) by all means enriched their respective literary languages with new metaphors and expressions. However, as for the Swedish and Finnish Bible translations which have used Luther's translation as their source text, these new metaphors and idioms are Luther's German idioms, not Hebrew ones.

In the Estonian language the situation is different. The first translation of the Old Testament which has survived to us, i.e. that by Johannes Gutslaff and the first published version of the Old Testament by Anton Thor Helle were both translated directly from Hebrew and both translators followed Hebrew idioms and expressions quite faithfully word by word. As nothing is known of the translation-theoretical views of either man, we cannot say at this moment, whether the reason, i.e. the faithfulness of the translations, lay in the

translators' principles or rather in their limited knowledge of Estonian. Either way, both of these Estonian translations abound in Hebrew idioms.

The issue has not been properly investigated, but it seems that Gutslaff followed the original text more to the word than the later complete Bible of 1739. However, this impression may be illusory and due to the fact that Gutslaff's translation was never distributed. This might be the reason, why the Hebrew expressions in his translation are more striking, being so strange to modern Estonian. For example, Gutslaff translated the phrase *lo tiśśa' et-šem-YHWH eloheka lašaw'* ('you shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God') from the second command (Ex 20:7) word-by-word *Ei peat Sinna jumala ... nimme ütte tühja pähle tõstma* ('do not lift the name of your God on an empty'). The expression *ühe tühja peale tõstma* ('to lift on an empty') means nothing in modern Estonian and sounds quite as strange as its English translation. But we may presume that if Gutslaff's translation had been published, this could well have become a normal everyday expression of the Estonian language.

In fact, modern Estonian contains many expressions of Hebrew origin which were used in the first published Estonian Bible, but which are not known in German, Swedish or Finnish, due to Luther's method of translation. E.g. the expression *tühi töö ja vaimunärimine* ('empty labour and gnawing at spirit'), which is a faithful translation of the phrase *hebel ur'ut ruaḥ*[4] from the book of Ecclesiastes, sounds so natural in modern Estonian, that a young Estonian critic recently confessed in a newspaper article that he had always thought that this expression originated in the books of Oskar Luts, the most famous Estonian writer for children.

The expression occurs in the Book of Ecclesiastes seven times. Since Luther was not very consistent, he translated it differently in different instances; nevertheless, according to his principles he used only "pure German expressions": *eitel und Jammer* (1:14, 2:11) *eitel und Mühe* (2:17, 4:4), *eitel Jammer* (2:26), *eitel und ein Jammer* (4:16), *Eitelkeit und Jammer* (6:9). The Swedish and Finnish translations follow the German model quite precisely: the Swedish translation *fåfänglighet och jämmer* (1:14, 2:11, 4:16, 6:9), *fåfänglighet och mödosamt* (2:17), *fåfänglighet och bekymmer* (4:4), *jämmer* (2:26); the Finnish translation *turhuus ja viheljäisyys* (1:14), *turha ja viheljäisyys* (4:16, 6:9), *turhuus ja vaiva* (2:11), *turha ja vaivallinen* (4:4), *turhat ja työlät* (2:17), *viheljäisyys* (2:26).[5] Due to that modern German, Swedish and Finnish have no vestige of this Hebrew expression.

Thus we may say that thanks to our first Bible translators modern Estonian is in some sense richer than German, Swedish or Finnish: the Estonian phraseology has a Hebrew component which those languages do not share.

Notes

1. In the present article Luther's text is cited according to an undated 19th century publication entitled *Die Heiligen Schriften des Alten und Neuen Testaments nach Dr. Martin Luthers Uebersetzung. Dritte Auflage. Golgau.* The edition is equal with Luther's version of 1545 with the exception of some morphological and orthographic modernisation.

2. A requirement that a translation of the Bible needs to be precisely equivalent to the original Hebrew (and Greek) text and, at the same time, to rely upon Luther's German translation, was reputedly presented to the translators of the complete version of the Finnish Bible (1642; Nuorteva 1992:20).

3 *Or cette histoire est marquée en Europe d'une série d'effacements. L'Europe est née de la traduction et dans la traduction. L'Europe ne s'est fondée que sur des traductions. Et elle ne s'est constituée que de l'effacement de cette origine toute de traduction. Ce qui vaut pour ses textes fondateurs, ceux de ses deux piliers, le grec pour sa science et sa philosophie, l'hébraïque pour la Bible, Ancienne Alliance comme Nouvelle Alliance. L'occultation de l'occultation étant celle de l'hébraïsme, dans toute l'histoire du théologico-politique occidental. Qui est l'histoire de l'anti-judaïsme philologique chrétien* (Meschonnic 1999:32).

4. True, while the Hebrew expression contains a play of words, an Estonian translation could hardly render its nuances in full. However, I should like to emphasize here first and foremost the translator's effort to preserve the original expression as precisely as possible.

5. The Swedish counterparts have been quoted from the 1764 edition of the Swedish Bible, the Finnish ones from the first edition (1642) with a modernised orthography.

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Sammanfattning

Den första kompletta estniska bibelöversättningen publicerades 1739, men redan på 1600-talet gjordes ambitiösa försök att översätta bibeln. Ett exempel är det manuskript från 1650-talet som innehåller en översättning av bibeln fram till 1 Kungaboken, där översättningen till sydestniska är gjord av Johannes Gutslaff. Både detta manuskript och 1739 års översättning är översatta direkt från hebreiskan, till skillnad från omgivande protestantiska – svenska, finländska och lettiska – översättningar, vilka i princip baserades på Luthers tyska bibelöversättning. Luther hävdade att en översättare inte ska följa grundspråket ordagrant, utan istället ska sträva efter ett elegant språk. I sin översättning ignorerade Luther därför genomgående och medvetet typiska hebreiska talesätt och uttryck och använde istället uteslutande tyska formuleringar, vilka de svenska och finländska bibelöverättarna översatte jämförelsevis ordagrant till sina respektive modersmål. De estniska översättningarna följde däremot striktare den ursprungliga hebreiska texten och översatte hebreiska talesätt ordagrant till estniska, vilket fått till följd att estnisk fraseologi än idag har ett hebreiskt inslag som saknas i tyska, svenska och finska.