Different Paradigms related to God, Language, and Translation

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1. Introduction

When reading the Scriptures, it seems evident that God the Divine Source and Inspirer of the Scriptures intends to bring peace, unity, and salvation for his people and his creation.

In light of this, it is deeply ironic that Bible interpretation and Bible translation have often led to painful controversies that divide the body of Christ and harm the reputation of Christians in the world.

Public controversy regarding the Word of God among Christians is in fact an anomaly that does not seem to rhyme with the calling of the church to participate in the mission of God in the world. Rather than being agents of controversy and confusion, the church is called to bring the Gospel of peace and salvation to the world. Controversy and confusion form a severe threat to the expansion of the Kingdom of God. They are obstacles to the reception of the Gospel and the experience of its life-changing power through the work of the Holy Spirit.

The work of Bible translation in particular should lead toward uniting Christians while inviting outsiders into the Kingdom of God. Bible translation intends to bridge barriers of language, culture, and history. The ultimate purpose of Bible translation is to bridge the gap of hostility and spiritual alienation between God and man. Bible translation should never become a vehicle for division and controversy among believers.

This does of course not mean that there is no place for discussion and diversity of opinion. Respectful dialogue about Bible translation should be an integral aspect of the mission of God in the world. However, it is important that those who participate in this dialogue make a clear distinction between God's Truth (with a capital T) and their own understanding (with a lowercase u) of God's Truth and of the multiple ways he communicates his Truth through the translated Scriptures. It is only in dialogue with the understanding of “all the saints” of the present and the past that we begin to discover God’s Truth in the midst of the wide variety of human understandings of God’s Truth.

Bible translators and their communities should make it a high priority to liberate themselves from the curse of Babel. Bible translations are the places where God meets people, just like the name of the

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1 This paper reflects research that is still in progress. I welcome comments and questions that will help improve the content of this paper.


3 Some of these controversies arose during the introduction of the RSV (1952), the introduction of dynamic equivalent translations, the inclusion of gender-inclusive language in Bible translations, and the discussions related to the rendering of Divine Familial Terms (2008-2013).

4 The story of the Tower of Babel can be read and interpreted in a variety of ways. Some see it as a reference to a Babylonian ziggurat (a temple in the form of a step pyramid); others see it as a reference to an ancient citadel. There is also a difference of opinion regarding the question where this tower was located and at what time it actually existed. For an overview of different perspectives, see Ellen van Wolde et al., De Toren van Babel (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Meinema, 2004).
ancient Tower of Babel described in Genesis 11 suggests (bab-ilu means “gate of the gods”). But just like Babel, Bible translations are places where pride and “confusion” (balal, “confuse”) can lead to lasting separation and dispersion.

This paper explores the topic of Divine communication and Bible translation in light of the mission of God in some detail. Many authors—both ancient and modern—have written about the topic. This paper is limited in scope both in terms of the topics it addresses and in the number of authors and concepts it interacts with.

The main thesis of this paper is that different perspectives on Bible translation are rooted in different deep-seated convictions related to the nature and purpose of the Bible and of Bible translation. Different perspectives on Bible translation are not just a matter of individual taste, different translation techniques, or different ways of ranking translation principles; they are directly related to deep-seated convictions regarding truth and falsehood. Different communities of Christians cherish different paradigms related to language, meaning, communication, and context. Understanding these different paradigms, which are largely implicit (tacit), is an important step in finding more unity in diversity.

This paper discusses the following topics:

- Different Paradigms related to God, Language, and Translation (section 2)
- God, Language, and Translation in the Bible (section 3)
- The Nature of God’s Word: Divine and Human at the Same Time (section 4)
- Classical and Contemporary Perspectives on God, Language, and Translation (section 5)
- Case Study: Translating words for “Father” and “Son” (section 6)
- Conclusions (section 7).

2. Different paradigms related to God, Language, and Translation

The concept of ‘paradigm’ is of critical importance not only in the physical sciences, but also in the humanities and social sciences, and even in theology and missiology.\(^5\) The missiologist David J. Bosch (1991/2011) describes the history of missions as a series of consecutive paradigms of mission, each with their own understanding of the nature and purpose of mission.\(^6\) The different ways the church has practiced mission over the course of its history makes a lot of sense when we look at these different practices through the lens of the various context-dependent paradigms / models that formed the frame of reference for these varying practices.

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\(^5\) For a foundational discussion of the concept of ‘paradigm’, see Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996 Third edition). Kuhn (1996:23) defines the concept of ‘paradigm’ as follows: ‘In its established usage, a paradigm is an accepted model or pattern ...’ In grammar, for example, *amo, amas, amat* is a paradigm. ‘In this standard application, the paradigm functions by permitting the replication of examples any one of which could in principle serve to replace it.’ ‘In a science, on the other hand, a paradigm is rarely an object for replication. Instead, like an accepted judicial decision in the common law, it is an object for further articulation and specification under new and more stringent conditions.’ (Kuhn 1996:23)

In a similar way, different perspectives on God, language, and translation can be viewed from the perspective of different paradigms.

One important idea to keep in mind is the observation that paradigms in culture, religion, and theology are usually very persistent. As a result, they are not necessarily consecutive phases of changing patterns of thinking and action; older and newer paradigms often coexist with one another at the same time, while they are in explicit or implicit competition with one another. Constructive dialogue between proponents of different perspectives can be extremely difficult. People tend to view every fact and argument through the lens of their own paradigm while they consciously or subconsciously filter out notions that are important to the opposing paradigm but that seem to be irrelevant in light of their own paradigm.

Applied to Bible and Bible translation, different people and groups of people may have different perspectives regarding the following topics:

1. **What is the Bible?** Is the Bible God’s direct revelation, or is it just a witness of God’s revelation, in a more indirect sense?
2. **What is the nature of God’s self-revelation in the Bible?** Is the Bible primarily a book of propositional truths regarding God and man, sin and salvation? Or, is the Bible primarily a story about the mission of God in this world, and an invitation to people in the church and outside the church to repent and participate in God’s mission?
3. **What is Bible translation?** Are Bible translations a direct representation of the Bible as God’s main form of Self-Revelation (Mirror metaphor), or are they rather an attempt to communicate the meaning of the Bible across a threefold gap of history, language, and culture (Bridge metaphor)?
4. **Where is meaning located?** Is meaning located in the Biblical text and its translations? Or, is meaning located in the interaction between the text and the readers or hearers?
5. **How is accuracy in translation defined?** Is accuracy defined in terms of semantic correspondence between words in the translation with words in the source text? Or, is it defined in terms of accurate understanding of the intended meaning of the text not only at word level but also at the sentence level and the higher discourse levels?
6. **What are the main translation principles applied in translations?** Source-text oriented: Accuracy, transparency, and concordance? Audience oriented: Accuracy, clarity, naturalness, and acceptability?
7. **What is the role of the Bible in missions?** Is the Bible an instrument for evangelism? Or, is the Bible a document that is preserved by the church and that needs to be taught and explained in the church?
8. **What is the task of the translator?** Move the reader toward the text, or move the text toward the reader? Preservation of the objective meaning of the text? Or, communication of the intended meaning of the text?

Different Christians and different communities of Christians follow different paradigms with regard to the various questions mentioned above. The first paradigm emphasizes direct divine revelation through Bible translation; the second paradigm focuses on mediated communication of God’s revelation through Bible translation. In the following sections, these topics will be further explored.

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3. God, Language, and Translation in the Bible

Any discussion related to God, Language, and Translation should start with a survey of what the Bible itself says about this important topic.

In the first chapters of the Bible, the narrator of Genesis introduces God as the powerful (royal) Creator of heaven and earth who speaks everything into existence (Genesis 1). God also used language to communicate with Adam and Eve, the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and with Moses and the people of Israel, etc. in order to communicate his will and his plan of salvation.

The narrator of the Genesis story does not tell us which language or languages God spoke when he created the heavens and the earth, or when he called Abraham out of Ur, or when he spoke to Moses from the burning bush. But it is very likely that the receivers of God’s revelation heard him speak in a language they understood (Aramaic; Hebrew).

The story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) is one of the few places in the Bible that focuses on confusion and misunderstanding caused by differences in language. God confused the original language of wider communication to make sure that the people obeyed his command to spread out over the earth rather than dwelling together in one place and make a name for themselves.

Elsewhere in the Bible, differences in natural languages are never mentioned as a source of misunderstanding. Given their frequent encounters with people from other language groups, it is very likely that the patriarchs and the ancient Israelites were multilingual to a certain extent. In some cases, they were able to make use of an interpreter in cross-linguistic communication (Compare Genesis 42:23; Nehemiah 8:8).

The story of the hearing miracle in Acts 2 is a powerful reversal of the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. Confusion, misunderstanding, and dispersion make place for unity and community. The people from Jerusalem, Judea, and from the diaspora hear the apostles speak about God’s miraculous deeds in Jesus in their own languages. The same kind of unity and community is expressed in the eschatological vision of Revelation 7:9-10, where people from all the nations and languages join together in praising the name of God and of Jesus the Savior.

In modern missionary contexts, both passages are often quoted as forming the basis for doing Bible translation in vernacular languages around the world. However, strictly speaking, the purpose of these passages was not to articulate the importance of doing mission work or Bible translation work in and through these vernacular languages. The main point of these passages was rather to articulate the inclusiveness of the Gospel and the salvation it proclaimed for people originating from different language communities.

None of the apostles, as far as we know, used a vernacular language approach as their main strategy in order to communicate the Gospel. Koinè Greek, the language of wider communication, was the main vehicle for the rapid missionary expansion of the church during its formative years. The availability of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, was no doubt an important factor in facilitating the spread of the Gospel in the Hellenistic world beyond the borders of Jerusalem and Judea.
When the authors of the New Testament quote the Old Testament, they usually quote the Greek Septuagint. There is no indication whatsoever that they considered the Septuagint as an inferior (translated) version of the Holy Scriptures in the original languages of Hebrew and Aramaic.

The people of Israel in the Old Testament did in fact have a severe communication problem (See Isaiah 6:9-10), but this problem had nothing to do with linguistic, cultural, or historical obstacles. Their inability to understand God’s Word was rather a spiritual problem; it was a direct result of their disobedience and their refusal to listen to the words of the prophets God sent to them.

In the New Testament, people who spoke in tongues in a church gathering needed to bring an interpreter who could interpret what they said (1 Corinthians 14:27-28). Speaking in tongues was seen as a sign for unbelievers, not for believers. Prophecy, on the other hand, was acknowledged as being important for believers (1 Corinthians 14:22).

4. **The Nature of God’s Word: Divine and Human at the same time**

Karl Barth has made a useful distinction between three forms of the Word of God: 1. The Incarnation; 2. The Scriptures; 3. The testimony of the church. These three forms of the Word of God find their unity in the work of the Holy Spirit.  

Jesus Christ is “the Word of God” in the deepest sense of the word. God revealed himself in a unique and supreme way in his Son Jesus, who is the pinnacle of God’s revelation. All the Scriptures testify of him. The incarnation is the bridge in which God reconciles man to himself. God translated his own being into human form. Jesus was both God and man at the same time.

In a similar way, the Bible itself has a Divine side and a human side. The overall message is Divine in its origin, nature, and purpose. But, the actual language that is used is human. God did not reveal himself in Divine language, or in angelic language. He accommodated himself to human understanding and communicated with them in language that they were able to understand well.

The way God communicated to man in the Bible is never abstract or decontextualized. God communicated to man in a way that was always context-sensitive. Moses and the prophets spoke to the people of Israel in their familiar language and in concepts and images that were part of their culture.

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8 Matjaž Črnivec, ‘Theology of Translation’ 2012, [http://kud-logos.si/2002/theology-of-translation/](http://kud-logos.si/2002/theology-of-translation/) describes Barth’s doctrine of Divine Revelation as follows: ‘According to Barth’s analysis, the revelation occurs as an act of God’s self-disclosure through His Word. This Word of God can be construed in three levels or forms. Initially, on the first level or as the first “form,” it is understood as pure revelation, as a direct, personal act of speech or command of God, which both creates the universe and mankind and also conveys to humans a personal knowledge and encounter with the Creator. It culminates and has its most potent manifestation in the Incarnation of Christ. On the second level, this becomes the written word of God, the Scriptures, which can be also described as a divinely ordained and unique witness to the living Word of God (as understood on the first level). There is also a third level: the proclamation of the Church. Here the written word, with a view and experience that God’s direct encounter did occur by it, is proclaimed ever anew to the world in its contemporary culture, language and other contingencies, with the promise that God’s direct self-disclosure will occur in it again. It is important to note that God is personally active in all the three stages; God is the originator, the medium and the message, the subject, the predicate and the object, thus Barth can say: “God reveals Himself. He reveals Himself through Himself. He reveals Himself.” (CD 1.1: 296).’
Jesus taught in parables that reflected the customs and practices of his days. Yet at the same time his message went against the grain of the religious culture of his days.

The Bible itself is a library of books that was recognized by the church as the authoritative Word of God, in which God reveals himself. However, strictly speaking, God did not speak every word that is recorded in the Bible. God is quoted quite often in the Bible. But the Bible also quotes people who are speaking. The Bible even quotes words that are spoken by the serpent, the devil, and evil spirits who oppose God. This implies that not every word that is spoken in the Bible has the same authority, or can be viewed as ‘Divine discourse’.

The Bible as a foundational and authoritative book has a long history and prehistory of oral communication, written inscription, scribal transmission, editorial collection, and canonical reception. It is multi-layered both from a historical perspective and from a textual perspective.

The Bible contains a wide variety of text genres, ranging from historical narratives, parables, laws, sermons, and genealogies, to prophecies, psalms, prayers, and lamentations, to blessings, curses, proverbs, and wisdom sayings. Some of these texts focus on God’s Self-revelation; other texts express various human responses to God’s Self-revelation.

In the Bible God appears to use a wide variety of means of communication: Oral and written language; direct personal communication, and communication through visions and dreams; God also revealed himself “without words” in nature, in history, and in human conscience. God’s oral verbal communication often occurred together with a non-verbal sign that underscored the authenticity and the veracity of the message.

God’s Self-revelation in the Scriptures is holistic. It has the elements of Logos (appeal to logic), Pathos (appeal to emotion), and Ethos (appeal to ethics). It speaks to the hearts and the minds of the audience. God uses language to reveal himself, to establish a relationship with people, and to transform them. God does not always use language of power; he also uses language of love and attraction to persuade his people to love him and obey him.

The revelation of his special Name (YHWH) is a major highlight of God’s Self-revelation in the Scriptures. God uses language to express his own identity. But God does not reveal himself in speech acts only. He also reveals himself in acting in accordance with his promises of blessing and salvation and with his warnings of judgment.

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9 From a speech acts theory perspective, the Biblical texts contain a broad range of speech acts: 1. Declarative (Prophecies; announcements of judgments, for example); 2. Expressive (Psalms, for example); 3. Commissive (Promises); 4. Directive (Laws and regulations); and 5. Performative (God’s work of creation; Covenant making, etc.).

10 God’s Self-revelation in the Scriptures shows elements of Peirce’s threefold semiotic distinction (icon, index, and symbol): a. Anthropomorphic language and metaphorical language are primarily iconic. b. Theophany language (clouds, thunder, brightness, etc.) and symbolic communication (tabernacle, ark, altar, etc.) is primarily indexical: they are indicators of God’s presence, but not identical with God’s presence. c. God’s verbal communication in human language is primarily symbolic / arbitrary in the Peircean sense of the word.

11 Bourdieu has pointed out that every form of communication—no matter who the participants are—includes the symbolic expression of power relations: ‘One must not forget that the relations of communication par excellence - linguistic exchanges - are also relations of symbolic power in which the power relations between speakers or their respective groups are actualized.’ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 37.
The content (illocution) of God’s Word is partly contextual as it was originally directed to the primary audiences of ancient Israel and the early Christian church. But the overarching message of obeying God, believing in Jesus, expecting God’s kingdom, and loving our neighbor as ourselves is also perennial and is relevant even today.\textsuperscript{12}

5. Some Classical and Contemporary Perspectives on God, Language, and Translation

A. Various views of God and Language

The topic of God and language can be approached from different angles. Some authors approach the topic from a philosophical (semiotic) perspective, while others view it from a theological perspective. In this symposium, the topic is viewed from a missiological perspective. Each of these three perspectives has its own merits. Ideally, these approaches complement one another.

**Eugene A. Nida** follows a communicative (semiotic) approach that is rooted in information theory.\textsuperscript{13} He emphasizes the fact that ‘communication never takes place in a social vacuum, but always between individuals who are part of a total social context.’\textsuperscript{14} In line with this, Nida formulates the following principles of communication: 1. The response to the preaching of the Good News may at times reflect a social situation, even more than a religious conviction. 2. Opposition to the communication of the Christian message may be in many instances more social than religious. 3. Changes in social behavior may alter the religious view of behavior. 4. Effective communication follows the patterns of social structure. 5. A relevant witness will incorporate valid indigenous social structures.\textsuperscript{15}

Nida draws a clear distinction between “indigenization” and “syncretism”: ‘Indigenization consists essentially in the full employment of local indigenous forms of communication, methods of transmission, and communicators, as these means can be prepared and trained. Syncretism, on the other hand, involves an accommodation of content, a synthesis of beliefs, and an amalgamation of world views ...’\textsuperscript{16}

Nida insists upon a “point of contact” approach rather than a “common ground” orientation in the context of sharing the Gospel with people from other faiths.\textsuperscript{17} He describes the relationship between Christ and culture both in terms of continuity and discontinuity.\textsuperscript{18}

At the end of his book, Nida formulates a Biblical view of communication. He makes the following points: 1. Verbal symbols are only “labels” and are of human origin. 2. Verbal symbols, as labels for concepts, have priority over visual symbols in the communication of truth. 3. Language symbols reflect a

\textsuperscript{12} It is, however, not always easy to know which elements in the Bible are meant as perennial, unchanging truths and directions, and which elements are meant to be temporal and contextual. \textit{William J. Webb, Slaves, Women & Homosexuals. Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis} (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2001), 14-15 provides a long list of directive statements that can be taken either way. Webb has proposed a redemptive movement hermeneutic to interpret sticky issues like slavery, the position of women, and the attitude toward homosexuality in the Bible.


\textsuperscript{14} Nida, \textit{Message and Mission}, 94.

\textsuperscript{15} Nida, \textit{Message and Mission}, 132-133.

\textsuperscript{16} Nida, \textit{Message and Mission}, 185.

\textsuperscript{17} Nida, \textit{Message and Mission}, 214.

\textsuperscript{18} Nida \textit{Message and Mission}, 215.
meaningful relationship between symbol and behavior. 4. Communication is power. 5. Divine revelation takes place in the form of a dialogue (Compare Isaiah 1:18).19

Nida states that Divine revelation is not absolute, since we do not know everything yet about God. Divine Revelation is also incarnational, ‘for it comes not only in words, but in life.’ ‘Even if a truth is given only in words, it has no real validity until it has been translated into life. Only then does the Word of life become life to the receptor.’20

Vern Sheridan Poythress follows a theological approach that is not free from speculative notions.21 According to Poythress, man is able to speak because God created him in his image. Language reflects God in his Trinitarian character: Poythress views God as the speaker, Jesus as the discourse, and the Holy Spirit as the audience. He distinguishes between three aspects of God’s speaking: meaning, control, and presence (24). These are related to God’s omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence. Poythress is concerned about the reductionism of meaning that is implied in Nida’s approach to translation. He is particularly concerned about Nida’s componential analysis of semantic concepts.

Paul Ricoeur does not address the relationship between God and language in his essays on “Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning” (1976). But, he makes an important point when he states that ‘the inscription of discourse is the transcription of the world, and transcription is not reduplication, but metamorphosis.’22 Applied to Bible translation, this implies that Bible translations are not cross-linguistic transcripts or duplicates of the original texts, but rather transformations of the original texts. The secondary audiences for whom the translations are prepared, read and understand these translated texts from their own cultural contexts.

Nicholas Wolterstorff follows a philosophical approach.23 Wolterstorff makes the point that God’s speaking is not necessarily the same as God’s revelation. “Divine discourse” does not necessarily coincide with “divine revelation”. ‘Revelation occurs when ignorance is dispelled – or when something is done which would dispel ignorance if attention and interpretative skills were adequate.’ (23) God can use the language of a child (tolle, lege) and a story told by a friend to bring about a radical spiritual change in a person like Augustine. Wolterstorff makes extensive use of speech act theory in his book on “divine discourse”. Against Ricoeur and Derrida, he defends an authorial-discourse interpretation.

Jeannine K. Brown follows a communicative approach to translation.24 She formulated “six affirmations about meaning”: 1. Meaning is author-derived but textually communicated. Meaning can be helpfully understood as communicative intention. 2. Meaning is complex and determinate. 3. Meaning is imperfectly accessed by readers, both individual readers and readers in community. 4. Ambiguity can and often does attend meaning. 5. Contextualization involves readers attending to the original context and to their contemporary contexts, so that meaning can be appropriated in ways that acknowledge Scripture as

19 Nida, Message and Mission, 224-225.
20 Nida, Message and Mission, 226.
22 Paul Ricoeur, Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning (Fort Worth, Texas: The Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 42.
both culturally located and powerfully relevant. 6. The entire communicative event cannot be completed without a reader or hearer. 25

B. Accommodation

John Calvin and other Reformed theologians made use of the terms “accommodation” (“accommodation”) and “attemperatio” (“adjustment”) to express the idea that God revealed himself in human language.

According to Muller 26, ‘The Reformers and their scholastic followers all recognized that God must in some way condescend or accommodate himself to human ways of knowing in order to reveal himself. This accommodation occurs specifically in the use of human words and concepts for the communication of the law and the gospel, but it in no way implies the loss of truth or the lessening of scriptural authority. The accommodation or condescension refers to the manner or mode of revelation, the gift of the wisdom of the infinite God in finite form, not to the quality of the revelation or to the matter revealed.’

According to Wedgeworth 27, ‘The primary sense in which academic theologians speak of “accommodation” in John Calvin’s theology has to do with the nature of all divine revelation and is founded on the distinction between the infinite and the finite. It is an ontological claim about theology proper and anthropology. But there is also another sense in which Calvin will use “accommodation” to refer to the way in which the various human authors of scripture accommodate their speech to their audiences.’

The concept of ‘accommodation’ articulates the idea that the infinite God revealed himself in finite human language. By revealing himself to human beings, God bridges the ontological gap between himself and humanity. The logical corollary of the concept of ‘accommodation’ is that God’s revelation is true, but in an analogous way. God uses anthropomorphic language (body parts, emotions, actions) to reveal himself.

It is important to keep in mind that Calvin’s concept of “accommodation” is different from modern concepts of “contextualization”.

C. Five Models of Revelation

Dulles (2012) 28 identifies the following models of Revelation 29:

1. Revelation as Doctrine (Paul Helm, The Divine Revelation. Propositional revelation)
2. Revelation as History (Wolfhart Pannenberg)
3. Revelation as Inner Experience (David Tracy. The Analogical Imagination: “All experience and all understanding is hermeneutical.”)

25 Brown, Scripture as Communication, 80-99.
26 Richard Muller, Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms, (Baker 2006), 19.
29 Since many authors have written on this topic, I need to be very selective in presenting some of the main concepts that are relevant to this discussion.
4. Revelation as Dialectal Presence (Karl Barth, Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and David Kelsey, Ronald F. Thielman, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise*)

5. Revelation as New Awareness (Liberation theology; Gustavo Gutierrez: the kingdom of God becomes an utopian model of human society. Feminist theology)

Dulles also discusses symbolic mediation, Christ as the summit of revelation, revelation and the religions, the Bible: document of revelation, the Church: bearer of revelation, revelation and eschatology, and acceptance of revelation.

Dulles (2012:vii) distinguishes between a “convergence” approach to revelation as opposed to a “divergence” approach to revelation (William J. Abraham, Carl F. H. Henry, Karl Barth, James I. Packer). Dulles is a “continuist” insofar he holds that “revelation does not suppress but presupposes and perfects perceptual and cognitive faculties of the recipient.” But his approach also allows for a certain discontinuity. ‘In the case of revelation, I maintain, symbolic communication effects a profound conversion, carrying the subject across a logical gap and providing a new interpretative framework.’ (2012:vii).

Dulles does not propose a new symbolic model in place of the other five. His doctrine of symbolic realism does not rest on any of these models. All five models can accord a certain room for symbolic communication in revelation, but the concept and function of symbol varies according to the model (2012:viii)

From Dulles’ description, it is clear that God’s revelation has various functions: Propositional revelation (of truth), Divine presence, and new awareness or transformation. God’s revelation has symbolic dimensions (which are often latent), and it is mediated through the living tradition in the church (Dulles 2012:ix).\(^{30}\)

**D. The Indigenizing Principle and the Pilgrim Principle in Mission**

Lamin Sanneh has called our attention to the importance of “mission as translation.” “Translation” of the message is inherent to Christianity and has been responsible for the successful expansion of the Gospel in the world.

Sanneh views mission as a matter of translation\(^ {31}\) rather than diffusion: ‘Christianity is remarkable for the relative ease with which it enters cultures. In becoming translatable it renders itself compatible with cultures. It may be welcomed or resisted in its Western garb, but it is not itself uncongenial in other garb. Christianity broke free from its absolutized Judaic frame and, through a radical pluralism, adopted the Hellenic culture to the point of near absolutization.’

Sanneh acknowledges that ‘translation is a highly problematic enterprise.’ Translation is ‘problematic’, because ‘the original is assumed to be inadequate, or defective, or inappropriate, but at any rate ineffective for the task at hand. Thus a peripheral role comes to be assigned to the original mode.’\(^ {32}\)

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\(^{30}\) The strong connection between church and revelation is characteristic for Roman Catholicism. In the Protestant tradition, God’s revelation in the Bible is primarily related to the work of the Holy Spirit, who is at work in the church and in the world.


According to Sanneh, ‘Translation forces a distinction between the essence of the message, and its cultural presuppositions, with the assumption that such a separation enables us to affirm the primacy of the message over the cultural underpinnings.’

Sanneh is aware of the danger of “syncretism”: ‘... translation made Christianity vulnerable to secular influences and to the threat of polytheism.’

Sanneh’s notion of “mission as translation” is very similar to Walls’ “indigenizing principle”. Walls sees a tension between the “indigenizing principle” and the “pilgrim principle”: ‘Not only does God in Christ take people as they are: He takes them in order to transform them into what he wants them to be. Along with the indigenizing principle which makes his faith a place to feel at home, the Christian inherits the pilgrim principle, which whispers to him that he has no abiding city and warns him that to be faithful to Christ will put him out of step with his society; for that society never existed, in East or West, ancient time or modern, which could absorb the word of Christ painlessly into its system.’

E. Shaw & Van Engen

Shaw and Van Engen see a close connection between communication and mission. Their focus is on “communication as mission”. Mission is a dynamic process of making God known in particular contexts. This involves the entire translation (transfer) process. Mission is, in fact, a missiological proclamation.

The main thesis of their book is ‘that contemporary communication of the biblical message can be modeled after the way the writers of Scripture utilized earlier texts and restructured them for their contemporary audience.’ A case in point is the appropriation of the Canaanite word El (‘God’) by the Israelites and the transformation of its meaning from a polytheistic concept into a monotheistic concept.

Shaw & Van Engen make the point that ‘God does not change; but God created a world that constantly changes’. God’s eternal, unchanging truths need to be proclaimed in ever-changing, context-specific circumstances.

They approach the proclamation of the Gospel from three perspectives: theological, communicational, and cultural.

The communication of God’s truths in the world is an ongoing process that also leads to new insights. ‘Around the world today, especially in the majority world, and in part due to the work of

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33 Sanneh, Translating the Message, 31.
34 Sanneh, Translating the Message, 37.
37 Shaw & Van Engen, Communicating God’s Word, xiv.
38 Shaw & Van Engen, Communicating God’s Word, 17.
39 Shaw & Van Engen, Communicating God’s Word, xiv.
40 Shaw & Van Engen, Communicating God’s Word, xvi.
41 Shaw & Van Engen, Communicating God’s Word, xvi.
translator-missionaries, Christians now see things in Scripture that westerners did not previously understand.\textsuperscript{42}

F. Kevin J. Vanhoozer

Vanhoozer\textsuperscript{43} views translation as from three main concepts: Word, writ, and holiness.\textsuperscript{44} ‘Word’ stands for the difficulties inherent in making what is foreign familiar. It is the translator’s task to preserve sameness of meaning despite otherness of language. Bible translators translate ‘Holy’ words – not just foreign words but ‘wholly other’ words.\textsuperscript{45} The Scriptures are holy because they contain the words of the Holy One. ‘Writ’ refers to authoritative Bible translations, the King James Version in particular. Vanhoozer understands ‘translating holiness’ in two different ways: “formal (having to do with language and communication) and material (having to do with life and righteousness).” In other words, ‘translating holiness’ is not only a matter of translating holy words (content, meaning, illocution) from the source text into a target language. It is also a matter of translating those holy words into transformed behavior (perlocution).\textsuperscript{46}

According to Vanhoozer, “Bible translations are not simply set-apart human words that convey divine information, but vehicles of divine formation and means of grace. Translations are Spirit-employed means of inculcating godliness and cultivating Christlikeness.”\textsuperscript{47}

According to Vanhoozer, in translation ‘we cannot achieve numerical or ontological sameness (i.e. idem-identity), but we can achieve a non-identical equivalence (ipse-identity): a communicative constancy that preserves and even deepens our understanding of the original.’

Vanhoozer proposes a realistic perspective on translation. It is important to abandon the ideal of a perfect translation and acknowledge that the distance between the foreign and the familiar will never be entirely erased.\textsuperscript{48}

Vanhoozer asks himself the question where translation\textsuperscript{49} fits in with Barth’s threefold form of the Word of God (Jesus Christ, Holy Scripture, Christian preaching): ‘Ought we simply assume that translations are analytic under the second form, or does translation itself represent a fourth form of the Word of God?’\textsuperscript{50} He points out that ‘translation’ is an absent locus in the doctrine of the Scripture. According to Bernard Ramm, translation is the fourth and final product of special revelation.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{42} Shaw & Van Engen, \textit{Communicating God’s Word}, 15.
\textsuperscript{44} Vanhoozer, \textit{Translating Holiness}, 381.
\textsuperscript{45} Vanhoozer, \textit{Translating Holiness}, 382.
\textsuperscript{46} Vanhoozer, \textit{Translating Holiness}, 382.
\textsuperscript{47} Vanhoozer, \textit{Translating Holiness}, 383.
\textsuperscript{48} Vanhoozer, \textit{Translating Holiness}, 391.
\textsuperscript{49} Note that Vanhoozer bases his definition of “translation” on Colossians 1:13 and Hebrews 11:5 in the King James Version. Accordingly, he defines “translation” as a “transfer from here to there”.
\textsuperscript{50} Vanhoozer, \textit{Translating Holiness}, 382.
\textsuperscript{51} Vanhoozer, \textit{Translating Holiness}, 395.
According to Vanhoozer, ‘The whole economy of revelation and redemption may be viewed in terms of translation – the triune God (i.e. the divine ‘source’) going out of himself in order to communicate with what is other than himself (i.e. the human ‘target’).’

Vanhoozer concludes that ‘The KJV does more than communicate seventeenth-century English culture or, for that matter, the world of first-century Palestine. What it and other Bible translations ultimately transmit is not ancient or Elizabethan but eschatological culture: the strange new world of the kingdom of God that entered human history in Israel and, climactically, in Jesus Christ.’

Bible translations are holy because the triune God takes them up in his broader plan to give himself and his righteousness to us in the form of Jesus Christ.

G. Summary

The various authors who wrote about the topic of God, language, and / or translation are all aware of the tension between the Divine message in the Bible and the human language forms in which this message is communicated. When God revealed himself to Adam, the patriarchs, and the people of Israel, he was bridging the ontological gap between God and man by using human language.

There is also a threefold gap of language, culture, and history between God’s Self-revelation in the Scriptures and modern audiences. Some authors have called attention to the fact that translation is not just a matter of linguistic transformation, a changing of codes or sequences of labels. In order for translation to be successful, it needs to lead to transformation. This can only take place if the readers and hearers perceive the message as being relevant to their context.

Translation without contextualization will most likely not lead to appropriation of the message and transformation of the hearer. Contextualization is important. However, it should never lead to a loss of accuracy of meaning or to syncretism.

6. Case Study: Translating words for “Father” and “Son”

Over a decade ago (2008-2013), controversy arose regarding the rendering of the terms “Father” and “Son” for God and Jesus in Bible translations for Muslim audiences. Some translators had rendered “Father” as “Guardian” and “Son” as “Regent” or “Beloved One”, while they avoided literal renderings that tended to evoke serious misunderstandings (sexual connotations) among the target audiences.

Fortunately, an independent panel of respected scholars, appointed by the World Evangelical Alliance at the request of Wycliffe/SIL, settled the issue. They recommended preserving the literal renderings of these terms in translations, but to modify these terms as needed in order to avoid misunderstandings.

This issue related to the rendering of “Divine Familial Terms” was in fact very complex. Proponents of the literal rendering and those who advocated a more contextualized rendering differed in various respects: 1. Exegetical (What is the meaning of “Father” and “Son”?); 2. Translational (What is accurate translation? Can a translation be called accurate if it is misunderstood by the audience?); 3. Hermeneutical (Do translations need to reflect the understanding of the characters in the story, or do they need to reflect the understanding of the final authors of the story, who may have understood the

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52 Vanhoozer, Translating Holiness, 397.
53 Vanhoozer, Translating Holiness, 400.
54 Vanhoozer, Translating Holiness, 401.
deeper meaning of the terms?); 4. *Missiological*: What is the role of Bible translation in mission? Are Bible translations instruments of missionary outreach or are they just documents of God’s revelation, which needs further explanation provided by the church? 5. *Doctrinal*: Were these contextualized renderings intended as a compromise and an adaptation to Muslim theology, or where they a genuine attempt to remove unnecessary stumbling blocks in the communication of the Gospel?

A more detailed discussion of this controversy falls outside the scope of this section. However, one of the key issues where proponents of both perspectives tended to disagree is in how they classified the terms “Father” and “Son” when applied to the persons in the Trinity. Advocates of the contextualizing approach tended to label these terms as “metaphors”, while advocates of the literal approach tended to classify these terms as “literal” descriptions. However, in actual fact, these terms are neither “literally” true (according to our own human understanding), nor are they “metaphorically” true (God is a prototypical, ideal, unique Father; and Jesus is a prototypical, ideal, unique Son). Classifying these terms as “anthropomorphic” (analogous) categories instead might have helped to articulate more clearly both the similarity and the difference between human familial terms and Divine familial terms.

Proponents of the contextualized approach expressed concern about the fact that conservatives seemed to be reading later doctrinal theology back into the text; but they did not seem to take into account the fact that every reader, no matter what their theological position is, tends to read the Scriptures in light of their own understanding. Every reading of the Scriptures, and every translation of the Scriptures, is based on a contextualized reading of the Scriptures.

In light of this, it is important to keep the ambiguity in the translation in cases where the text allows more than one interpretation.

7. **Conclusion**

Christians from different traditions follow different paradigms related to the Bible, language, meaning, mission, and translation. The following chart is an attempt to capture the main differences:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Nature of God’s Revelation in the Bible</th>
<th>Revelation paradigm</th>
<th>Communication paradigm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Direct Revelation, Expressed in Special Language (From Above)</strong></td>
<td>Direct Revelation, Mediated through Common Language, Culture, and Understanding of the Hearer and Reader (Originating From Above, but Understood via Below)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Main Function of the Bible</th>
<th>Propositional</th>
<th>Instrument for Evangelism / Invitation to Transformation and Participation in the Mission of God (Dynamic; Narrative)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Document with Propositional Truths / Final Authority on Doctrinal Issues (Static; Propositional)</td>
<td>Bridges the Gap between the Source Text and the Target Audience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| The Nature of Translation | Mirrors the Source Text (Essentially Literal / Modified Literal) | Bridges the Gap between the Source Text and the Target Audience |

<p>| Translation as a Genre | Is Well-defined, and Stays Close to the Forms of the Source Text | Is More Open-ended, and May or May Not Include Contextualized Elements, |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Location of Meaning</th>
<th>Meaning is in the Text (Translation)</th>
<th>Meaning is in the Hearer’s / Reader’s Understanding of the Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complexity of Meaning In the Scriptures</td>
<td>Is Acknowledged, Especially in Regard to the “Sensus Plenior” of the Scriptures</td>
<td>Is Not Always Acknowledged; Interpretative Renderings May Limit the Meaning Potential of the Translated Text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspective on Communication in Bible translation</td>
<td>The Reader or Hearer Needs to be able to Draw Their Own Conclusions</td>
<td>Communication Needs to be Effective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy of Translation</td>
<td>Accuracy of words and sentences</td>
<td>Accuracy of understanding of the words and sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern for Accurate Communication Across Gaps of Language, Culture, and History</td>
<td>Does Not Seem To Be A Concern At All (Perhaps Due to Limited Experience in Cross-cultural Ministry)</td>
<td>Is a Matter of High Concern (Due To Extensive Experience in Cross-cultural Ministry)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern for Doctrinal Purity of Translations</td>
<td>Is a Matter of High Concern</td>
<td>Is Important, But Exegetical Accuracy Is Also Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Translation Principles</td>
<td>Accuracy, Transparency, Concordance</td>
<td>Accuracy, Clarity, Naturalness, Acceptability, Relevance, Contextual Meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rendering of Metaphors and Idioms</td>
<td>Source Language Metaphors and Idioms are Preserved in Translation</td>
<td>Source Language Metaphors are Not Always Preserved in Translation (But Many Are); Source Language Idioms Are Often Replaced by Target Language Idioms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation</td>
<td>Is Important in Preparation for Translation; But Interpretative Renderings Need to be Avoided in Translations</td>
<td>Is Inevitable in Translations; Translators Need to Make Choices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextualization</td>
<td>Is a Risk and a Threat (Contamination)</td>
<td>Is Necessary for Acceptance and Transformation of the Audience (Communication)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestication and Distancing</td>
<td>The Otherness of the Text Needs to be Preserved as Much as Possible in Translation (Both in Context and in Linguistic Expression)</td>
<td>Domestication of Linguistic and Culturally Appropriate Expression is Used to Highlight the Relevance of the Translated Text; The Content of the Text Is Not Domesticated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Main Function of Bible translations</td>
<td>Church Function (Liturgical; Preaching; Teaching; Bible Study)</td>
<td>Evangelistic Function (Missionary Outreach)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Despite the differences in paradigms, there is also some fundamental common ground, even though this is not always recognized:

A. The Bible is the authoritative Word of God

B. Bible translations need to be accurate (but opinions differ as to what exactly ‘accuracy’ actually means and how it can be best achieved)

C. The purpose of Bible translation is spiritual transformation (repent, believe, be transformed) (but opinions differ as to how this can be best achieved; either directly in Bible translation itself, or more indirectly through additional teaching and preaching)

These are important points to keep in mind during discussions related to different perspectives on Bible translation.

One way to overcome these fundamental differences in understanding the role of Bible translations is to recognize the fact that different translations have different strengths, and that different audiences may need different kinds of translation. Different translations provide different windows on the text, and different ways of connecting the audience with the text. These perspectives should be viewed as complementarian rather than as being in competition with one another.

In addition, it would be good to dispel some of the persistent myths and caricatures that have been used to disqualify dynamic equivalent translations and contextualized translations. Above all, respectful dialogue in a spirit of humility could help to foster mutual understanding.

**Bibliography**


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55 J.L. Packer’s words seem to be a good point of reference for dialogue and discussion. He wrote: ‘Let is be said that no one is implying that any type of dynamic equivalent rendering is useless.’ And: ‘The true verdict seems to be that for beginners in Bible exploration and study, the merits of the best dynamic equivalent versions outweigh their real limitations.’ In: Wayne Grudem, et al., *Translating Truth. The Case for Essentially Literal Translations* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2005), 14.

56 Some of those myths are the following: 1. Dynamic equivalent translations (or, contextualizing translations) always translate thought-for-thought rather than word-for-word. 2. These translations never retain the metaphorical language of the source text. 3. These translations intend to weaken Biblical doctrines or even introduce unbiblical doctrines.


