When Wilfrid Harrington published his *Record* trilogy in 1965-66, the Vatican Council was drawing to a close and the wider church was implementing the vernacular in the liturgy after nearly 2000 years of Latin. Less than a decade earlier, the French Dominican school, the École Biblique, had completed *La Bible de Jérusalem* translation, and in 1966 an English version, *The Jerusalem Bible* (JB), was published and was adopted as the text for the Lectionary.\(^1\) The Jerusalem Bible joined a growing collection of English Bibles; many were the work of biblical societies in the Reformed tradition but the new ecumenical spirit led to a number of these being issued as ‘ecumenical editions’ for use by a wider public than the members of a particular church.\(^2\) Providing translations of biblical and liturgical texts became a thriving industry and continues to be so, as indicated by two recent major projects: the new English translation of the Missal and the École Biblique’s BEST proposal—a new translation of the Bible with accompanying notes.\(^3\)

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\(^2\) For Catholics ecumenical editions meant that books were included from the larger Catholic canon (the deuto-canonical books) that are not part of the Reformed canon (which adopted the shorter Hebrew list of inspired books).

\(^3\) The term is an acronym for *La Bible En Ses Traditions*, in English ‘The Bible in its Traditions’. The project was launched in 2006 and contributions can be accessed at [www.bibest.org](http://www.bibest.org).
The aim of this essay is to explore and assess some of the factors driving the modern Bible translation industry. The Psalter provides a suitable focus for such a task, both in relation to translators and their readers. The psalms are poems and poetry is customarily regarded as a more ‘elevated’ form of discourse about things that matter; this tends to heighten the challenge for translators and the expectation of readers. Psalms are recited or sung as part of the daily *Prayer of the Church* and as responses to Lectionary readings. They are also used widely for private prayer. One can assume therefore that, as Old Testament texts go, they are fairly familiar. They also provide some contact with other perhaps less familiar parts of the Old Testament by referring or alluding to themes and issues in the Pentateuch or Torah, Prophetic and Wisdom Literature. Despite this, they do not all fit neatly into mainstream Roman Catholic worship and piety. Many are classified as lament psalms and laments are not a significant feature of our liturgies. Others are classified as cursing psalms and tend to be excluded from public recitation. The curse at the end of the otherwise popular Psalm 137 is a classic example. Overall, one could say that the psalms provide opportunity and challenge for a translator, leading to comfort or

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4 A basic feature of Hebrew poetry is parallelism, in which the second line normally resumes and develops the preceding one. The first line of Psalm 24:1 is ‘The Lord’s is the earth and its fullness’, with the second ‘the world and all its peoples’ (Grail translation). Parallelism can sometimes express a contrast (cf. Psalm 1:6), or involve more than two lines. Robert Alter’s recent translation strives to reproduce Hebrew parallelism as closely as possible, even to comparing the number of syllables per line of the English to that of the Hebrew (*The Book of Psalms. A Translation with Commentary* [New York/London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2007] xxx-xxxii).
discomfort for a reader. There is an Italian saying that ‘il traduttore é un traditore’ (the
translator is a traitor).

Bible translation is of course not a recent practice. Nehemiah 8 may well be the earliest
written record of Hebrew being rendered in a language familiar to listeners/readers, in
this case those who had returned from the Babylonian exile in the late 6th century BCE
and who no longer knew Hebrew. The translation was most likely into Aramaic, the
lingua franca of the ancient Near East. A similar situation in Alexandria in the 3rd century
BCE resulted in a Greek translation (the so-called Septuagint or LXX). We sometimes
speak of translating from the Hebrew ‘original’ but there is no original text of the Old
Testament available. It is generally agreed that the Hebrew behind the LXX differed in
varying degrees from the one that became the standard text for later Judaism (the
Masoretic Text or MT). The Dead Sea scrolls reveal evidence of other Hebrew
‘originals’. Does this say something about human limitations and/or something about the
nature of the Word of God? That is, it can be expressed in human words but not captured
or contained by any one version of them—another way of saying that the Word of God is
living and active, ever old and ever new. Difference or variety is evident within the Bible
itself: a clear example is the at times quite different accounts of Israel in the Former
Prophets (or ‘the Historical Books’) and the Books of Chronicles.

In terms of theory, Bible translation through the ages has oscillated between a more literal
and a more liberal/flexible approach, what some call a source oriented and a target
oriented approach. Each claims to present an authentic version of the text to the reader or
receiver. A literal translation stays as close as possible to forms and conventions of the
source language whereas a flexible one seeks to incarnate its meaning in the target
language of the receiver—entering its forms and conventions. The LXX is regarded as a
literal translation of the Hebrew in comparison to the Aramaic Targums, but this was not
good enough for the subsequent Greek versions of Aquila and Theodotion. They are even
more literal than the LXX. In the Latin speaking world, Jerome saw his Vulgate
translation as an authentic rendering of the Hebrew original (he had studied the language)
but Augustine and others were critical. 5

As one might expect, modern Bible translation theory and practice reflects to a
considerable degree major developments in modern Bible study, and the study of
literature in general. Until recently the dominant one has been historical critical or
diachronic analysis that seeks to discover how biblical texts came about; from their
origins to what is called their final redaction (editing). This has tended to favour a more
literal translation in so far as practitioners endeavour to identify as accurately as possible
the original text and the circumstances of its production (the author, the culture, the time,
etc). More recently however, philosophical and literary theory has shifted attention to the
dynamics involved in the act of reading a text (synchronic analysis). According to this
view, readers do not simply receive the meaning of a text but create it anew in each act of
reading—as evidenced by different readings. Critical (responsible) readers must of course
respect the parameters established by an author, otherwise they cannot claim that their

5 See ‘Jerome’s Vulgate’ in Roland H. Worth Jr., Bible Translations. A History Through
27-41.
reading is authentic. One may say that, once a text has been composed, its author becomes its reader along with other readers, albeit a rather well informed one. This approach tends to favour a more flexible or creative translation. Some examples may help to illustrate the difference between the two approaches.

Mitchell Dahood’s three volume commentary on the psalms, the first volume being published in the same year as Harrington’s Record of Revelation, exemplifies the drive to recover the original version that characterizes historical critical analysis, in particular form criticism. A good example is his translation of Psalm 63:3 (63:4 in the MT)—‘How much sweeter your kindness/than my life and lips that praise you’. In contrast, the popular Grail version used in the English Breviary has—‘For your love is better than life/my lips will speak your praise’. Dahood appeals to Ugaritic, a language ‘whose closest affinity is to biblical Hebrew’, to help recover the original sense of the psalms. He proposes that the Hebrew term normally translated as ‘good/better’ should be rendered ‘sweet/sweeter’, based on Ugaritic and parallels in Psalms 33:3; 45:2. He also proposes that the MT of v. 3 needs to be corrected to preserve a Hebrew grammatical rule that ‘After subjects of different genders, the predicate is put in the masculine plural’. The subjects are ‘life’ (masculine) and ‘lips’ (feminine) and the predicate is ‘praise you’. The

7 Dahood, Psalms I, xix.
8 Dahood, Psalms II, 98. It is recognized however that Hebrew poetry, like other poetry, does not always obey the rules.
correction involves shifting the final letter from the preceding word (life) to the following word (lips). The result is a double comparison ‘than my life, than my lips’ rather than the single as in the Grail translation. This is possible because Hebrew words were not separated in early manuscripts and mistakes were no doubt made during the later separation process. However, the notion of ‘my life’ praising God does not occur anywhere else, nor does the combination of ‘my life’ and ‘my lips’ praising God. The difference between the two translations is theologically significant. In Dahood’s version three sweet things are compared, God’s (your) kindness and my life and my lips, with the first being sweeter than the others. While the contrast between the possessive pronouns ‘your’ and ‘my’ is effective, my preference is for the Grail translation which—following the MT—draws a dramatic contrast between two things, God’s love and life itself. The psalmist can do no other than praise God’s love, the good on which all others, such as life, depend.

Historical critical analysis also endeavours to retrieve the original meaning of texts by comparing ancient manuscripts. For example, the MT of Psalm 8:2-3 (8:1-2 in English) is unclear and Greek, Syriac and Aramaic (Targums) manuscripts offer variant readings. Depending on which reading one adopts a different translation emerges with a different understanding of the role of infants in the text. Two of these are reflected in the RSV and the NRSV revision:

Thou whose glory above the heavens is chanted by the mouths of babes and infants,

thou hast founded a bulwark because of thy foes to still the enemy and the avenger (RSV)
You have set your glory above the heavens.

Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,

to silence the enemy and the avenger (NRSV)\(^9\)

In the RSV, the role of infants is to sing of God’s glory; in the NRSV their voices serve as a bulwark against God’s foes, reducing them to silence. Should one adjudicate between these translations and understandings—each can claim to be as authentic or original as the other—or accept two differing and powerful images of the role of infants in God’s scheme of things?

The form critical quest for the original text claimed to uncover a phenomenon that has come to be of central importance for historical critical analysis, and is relevant for the theory and practice of translation. This is what is called redaction or the editing of texts to update and apply them to new situations. The pursuit of the original version meant that terminology and expressions that did not appear, from a critical point of view, to fit the recovered original were deemed to be later additions. These were initially regarded as relatively unimportant from a theological point of view but in time redaction criticism has assumed increasing importance. Redactors or editors are now seen as skilful theologians who carefully reworked existing texts to give them new life and meaning. Differences

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between manuscripts are now also seen, at least in part, as evidence of this interpretative process.

Antony F. Campbell argues that Psalm 78 was originally composed as a theological interpretation of events leading up to the establishment of the Davidic monarchy. It claimed that they signaled God’s rejection of the rebellious Israel of Shiloh and the election of David’s Jerusalem. The original was subsequently edited by deuteronomic theologians to apply its teaching to their accounts of later reforming kings, most likely Hezekiah or Josiah. Campbell identifies deuteronomic additions in vv. 5-8, 10, 56b, 58.

The nature and strategic location of these additions suggest that the editors or redactors carefully studied the original version of the psalm as well as the situation(s) to which they applied it. They saw that the original conveyed a message that they could apply creatively but still authentically to a new situation and new audience.

An interesting aspect of the redaction of biblical texts is that it has something in common with the more flexible side of the translation equation. Both share a focus on the reader or receiver. Nevertheless, translation is a more complicated process than the inner biblical process of editing/redaction. Two languages and their respective authors or readers are involved, as well as the translator who also functions as a reader in relation to the source language. As noted earlier, more recent biblical exegesis has shifted attention from the relationship between author and text to that between reader and text. Their relationship

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has been explored not only by biblical scholars but also by translation theorists, a major figure in the biblical arena being Eugene A. Nida. A member of the Methodist church and an active missionary as well as an academic, Nida has spent a lifetime seeking to provide a translation that is accurate yet enables the Bible to speak in the target or receptor language in a way that ordinary people can understand.\textsuperscript{11} This means that one needs to pay attention to the context of both the source language (the biblical text) and the target language. One must study not only the philology and grammar of each language but also their sociological, cultural and religious contexts. Translation is an interdisciplinary matter. The scope of biblical translation also led Nida to be one of the earliest Bible translators to employ discourse analysis in addition to philology and grammar. Communication is always a structured affair and discourse analysis examines how words, phrases and sentences are combined or structured to produce whole texts such as a psalm or a book. In effect, Nida and his team doubled the historical critical agenda. They applied their critical tools not only to the source language but also to the target language. Their goal was ‘that the relationship between receptor and message should be substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptors and the message’.$^{12}$


\textsuperscript{12} Nida, \textit{Toward a Science of Translating: With Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating} (Leiden: Brill, 1964) 159.
As historical critical analysis has come to realize however, it is difficult to be certain how people in biblical times responded to texts. Some prophetic texts report people’s reactions, particularly to negative prophecies, but the psalms provide little information about how people responded to and used them. Some superscriptions or titles provide clues, such as Psalms 120-134, each of which is entitled A Song of Ascents. They may have formed a prayer book for those making the pilgrimage ‘up’ to Jerusalem. But, was this their original setting and use? Lack of certainty on this side of the translation equation is compensated for to some extent on the other side of the equation—the response of those in the receptor language. This can be measured. But even here Nida came to see that a translator’s observations could only go so far. To be sure that a translation makes sense to native speakers (the subjects) of the target language, a translator needs to listen and learn from them.

Nida described his translation theory and practice as dynamic equivalence, in order to distinguish it from the more literal approach, what was called formal equivalence. Later, in the light of criticism and reflection, he altered the description to functional equivalence. The best-known example is the Good News Bible (GNB, 1976). Its translation of a key verse in the famous ‘miserere’ Psalm 51, namely v. 5 (v. 7 in the MT) invites some comment and comparison: ‘I have been evil from the time I was born/from the day of my birth I have been sinful’. There is quite a difference between this and the more literal (and familiar) rendering in the RSV: ‘Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity/and in sin did my mother conceive me’ (cf. the NRSV; ‘Indeed I was born guilty/a sinner when my mother conceived me’). The RSV is closest to the Hebrew (which is also followed by Dahood) and one suspects that the GNB and the NRSV are
seeking to make sense of this text to an English language readership that is a)-
individualistic, and b)-would object to the implication that conceiving a child is (always)
a sinful act. Both translations focus on individual sin and either eliminate reference to the
mother (GNB) or transfer the reference to sin from her to the psalmist (NRSV). While
these translations catch the pervasive presence of sin in one’s life, they fail to capture
other features of Hebrew thinking about sin—such as the connection between individual
and community, between past and present, as well as a sense of the general state of
human sinfulness. Hebrew has a variety of terms for sin, their meaning and relationship is
fluid and depends to a considerable degree on context. Without going into the details, I
would suggest that the parallel statements in v. 5 refer to the general state of human
sinfulness that touches life at all stages, from the begetting of it to the living of it. One
may also note that the GNB translation gives the impression that the psalmist committed
sins from the day of birth. This would presumably strike a modern English reader as
strange and perhaps even as offensive.

This is one example from a translation that has proved popular and helpful to many in the
English speaking world. Critics from the literal or formal equivalence side have found
plenty of other examples to object to and a vigorous debate has developed between the
two approaches. For example, Y. C. Whang argues that the variety of readers and
contexts in the receptor or target language makes functional equivalence untenable. The
translator’s job ‘is to convey the idea of the author, and to understand the idea is the role
of the reader’. Stephen Prickett objects that dynamic or functional equivalence’s desire to make sense of the Bible in a target language risks obliterating the subtlety and ambiguity of the original, particularly in poetic discourse. Simon Crisp notes that in the Orthodox tradition the biblical text is likened to an icon that provides only limited access to the mysterious world of the all holy. Phyllis Bird believes that a translation should allow a modern audience ‘to overhear an ancient conversation rather than to hear itself addressed directly’. While these are telling comments, advocates of functional equivalence can reply that they do not take into account sufficiently the biblical conviction that God does speak to readers and listeners directly and in a very human way, as indicated by the second person singular and plural address in Deuteronomy, the lively language of Prophetic discourse, and the report in Acts 2:8-11 that all those listening to


Peter’s Pentecost sermon—the Word of God according to the biblical claim—heard it in their own language. As the Acts text in particular makes clear, God speaks in all the languages of human beings: one could say that there is no sacred language or that all are sacred because the Word of God is able to be incarnated in all. This is different to Islam where Arabic is regarded as the one sacred language. But the more literal camp could reply by saying that, according to Christian belief, God became incarnate in human form in order to transform humanity. Therefore, shouldn’t one faithfully transmit those strange and mysterious biblical texts in the belief that they will transform the target language, rather than take charge by having the biblical text conform to the target language?

The debate goes on and one may ask is there any way of resolving the differences between the two? Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere judge that the notion of some universally valid way of translating is no longer viable, if it ever was, particularly in the modern arena: ‘specific translators decide on the specific degree of equivalence they can realistically aim for in a specific text’.17 If this is a fair comment about the general situation in Bible translation, the recent Roman document *Liturgian Authenticam* indicates that the Vatican is moving firmly in the other direction. To gain approval from a Bishop’s conference or the Holy See, translations will need, a)-to show literal and not functional/dynamic equivalence, and b)-contain minimal ‘horizontal inclusive language’

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and avoid altogether ‘vertical inclusive language’ (in relation to God). These requirements differ considerably from the ones enunciated at the Vatican Council in the instruction *Comme le prevoit* and which guided the work of *ICEL* and its 1994 translation of the Psalter. According to a recent article by Emil A. Wecla a key factor driving the recent changes is inclusive language. One can understand the desire for a standard biblical text for the church’s public liturgy and, given the church’s long use of the Vulgate, a more literal translation policy is hardly surprising. But it is doubtful whether this will replace the wide variety of translations now available to the English speaking public. The variety of translations both past and present alerts us to the limitations of our ability to translate the Bible; it signals the limitations of the biblical text itself in expressing the Word of God, as John 21:25 makes clear; it also schools us to listen and learn from these various translations.

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