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# HIDE AND SEEK. ASPECTS OF THE DYNAMICS OF BIBLE TRANSLATION<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Art may be viewed as fetish, in that it forces meaning on a chaotic world — a dynamic which is briefly illustrated in this article by means of Pablo Picasso's famous painting, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. Similarly, translations of the biblical texts, which result from very complex processes, may be viewed as fetishes. Translation thus requires a process of deducing and reducing meaning from relative chaos. A proper view of the nature of the Bible text and the theoretical load of exegetical and translation activities must be cultivated among lay translation users, particularly in our age of rising fundamentalisms. To this end, five suggestions are offered. This view affords Bible translators a more balanced status, namely one of humanity with dignity, than is at times found in some popular circles which regard Bible translators with severe suspicion.

## 1. ART, FETISH, POWER, TEXTS

One of the effects on European culture of the colonialist “scramble for Africa” was a resurgence of fetish interest in parts of Europe's intellectual life (Pietz 1996:201-202). The influence of African fetish masks lies, for instance, behind Pablo Picasso's 1907 painting, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*.

During February and March 2006, a selection from Pablo Picasso's art works was exhibited for the first time on African soil, in Johannesburg (cf. Hobbs 2006; from April to May, the exhibition moved to Cape Town). The purpose of the exhibition was to indicate the influence African art had had on Picasso's development. It was, namely, through West African masks that Picasso had come to see his own art as fetish (cf. e.g. Hobbs 2006:ii-1). The masks had, at least to Picasso's eyes,<sup>2</sup> for their original sculptors been a mystical way of gaining control

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2 “Africa” seems always to become an icon, often serving a certain kind of paternalistic, if not always romanticising, rhetoric, rather than that its complexities are acknowledged. See Wainana (2006) on how this is the case in literature, and Lombaard (2006a:148-152) on how this occurs in African contextual theology.



over the forces of nature and society around them (cf. Pietz 1996:197-198). In the mask, the uncontrollable of life is given recognisable form. It was through these African fetish masks that the insight dawned on Picasso: *that* had been the purpose of his art. Art was Picasso's fetish — a way of forcing some form onto the chaos that is existence. By taking control of what cannot in reality be taken hold of, because the chaos that is life lies beyond any significant grasp, art forces meaning onto reality. Interpretation gives sense to what would otherwise be incomprehensible. (One can detect later decades' literary theory in these stances, theories that were to become influential in much of biblical scholarship).

Acknowledging the influence of his viewing of African masks on *Les Femmes d'Alger*, Picasso, quoted in Ferrier (1999:81, and also on the local exhibition plaques), later remarked:

But all these fetishes, they served for the same thing. They were weapons.  
 To help people stop being subjects of the spirits, to become independent.  
 Tools. If we give the spirits a shape, we become independent ... I understood why I was a painter.

In this way, a fetish — be it a mask, a painting, or a text — not only encapsulates power by pulling together into one form of expression what lies beyond human control; a fetish at once also endows power (Pietz 1996:202-204). The fetish exerts influence over those who are presented with it. This is a hide and seek game:

- By sublimating the uncontrollability of the natural and social forces of life, the fetish *hides* the uncertainties. The fetish conceals, precisely because it sought to capture, the instability of life, the elusiveness of truth, and the absence of psychological and existential peace.
- At the same time, the fetish *seeks* to convey these characteristics — stability, truth, peace — to all who fall under its spell, those who encounter and revere it. The fetish thus imparts a “false consciousness”,<sup>3</sup> leaving its interpreters with a view of life that is, misleadingly, secure. Here is an avenue, a medium — and remember McLuhan’s (1967) “The medium is the message”! — for stability, truth, peace ...

This state of affairs approaches, in some ways, what is the case with the *Books of Bokoron*, the holy scripture of Kurt Vonnegut’s fictional (or fictionalised — Blier 1993:141-143) Caribbean/West African religion of Bokonomism, in his novel *Cat’s cradle*, which opens with this line (Vonnegut 1974:16): “All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies.”

A fetish in this narrow use of the term I would like to ascribe to it here, thus entails something holy being given a greater sense of stability than it truly has, eliciting in its addressees unrealistic expectations of the fetish itself, of the matters it represents (or hides), and of the life situation it seeks to address.

Masks, in Africa, for Europe, and in the arts universally (i.e. everywhere, and in all forms of art), in one sense hide what lie behind them, and in another sense seek to project an interpretation; these are — to paraphrase Nkosi (1981:iii-iv) — masks with tasks. The fetish allays anxieties about what lies behind it, and reassures its addressees about what lies on their side of it (cf. Burgin 1987:303, 305, 307, 309). In both cases it over-simplifies. A fetish is thus in a sense a “synecdoche or metonymy, with the part assuming essential values of the whole” (Blier 1993:144). This leaves the viewer in interpretative ecstasy: magic! Such is the nature of a fetish.

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3 Terminology from Marxist circles, not uncommonly related to Marxist fetish rhetoric, which analyses relationships of alienation. Bleckner (1987:317) too makes the point that the fetish creates alienation, and it reduces the means of living life authentically.

## 2. TRANSLATION AS HIDING AND SEEKING

In a previous offering on Bible translation (Lombaard 2002a:754-765), I made the point that not everything about a source text can be rendered in a translated text. Employing the traditional distinction in Bible translation circles between literalism and dynamic equivalence,<sup>4</sup> the popular notion that either of these approaches could be termed objectively better than the other was rejected (cf. Baker 1992:7; Bastiaens 1998:151-152; Smalley 1991:111-112). Within the ambit of each respective approach, of course, assertions could be made on the relative quality of different attempts. When it comes to a cross-theoretical evaluation, that is, between a literal or dynamic equivalent translation (for example between, respectively, the 1933/53 and 1983 Afrikaans Bible translations), though, judgments have to be made with great circumspection.

The options these two theoretical main streams in Bible translation offer us (to some extent, at least<sup>5</sup>), is a choice that either the structure or the content of the source text-and-language is given precedence during the translation process. This choice is usually seen most plainly in the way poetic texts such as the Psalms are interpreted. With each translation, the way in which these aspects of form and content are balanced, of themselves demand in various ways consideration by the translator. The latter has to decide, either from explicit theoretical grounds or from unconsidered reflex, on the interplay between form and content in the source text with form and content in the translated text. Hence: “Elke vertaling is ’n vertelling”; that is: each translation is a narration (Lombaard 2002a:754-755). Translators should, one would prefer, choose consciously (and then keep to their decision as far as possible<sup>6</sup>) what it is about the source text they wish to give greater prominence to in the translated text.

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4 The most recent reformulations of these more traditional terms I use here are, respectively, “Source language oriented translations” and “Target language oriented translations”. Cf. e.g. Orlinsky & Bratcher (1991:1-266) and Turro (1983:4-53, 67-116) for overviews of the debate on these options. For brief descriptions of these approaches, see Lombaard (2002a:756-759). Naudé (2002:47) describes alternative refinements of this broad approach. For further insights into recent theoretical discussions, some of which parallels what follows below, see Venuti (1998; 2008), Wilt (2003), Beeby, Ensinger and Presas (2000), Venuti and Baker (2000), Hickey (1998), Nord (1997), Gutt (1991) and the literature cited in Naudé (2002).

5 Naturally, this is not a completely “either-or” kind of choice, since no language can exist without both form and substance; it is here a question of emphasis in translation. Cf. e.g. Wendland (2002:180-183) and Jordaan (2002:20, 26-27).

6 At present a team of translators are working on a new literal Afrikaans Bible translation. However, a strong debating point is whether gender-sensitive language should be employed with reference to God — something which would at first take seem at odds with a literal translation approach. This debate illustrates the difficulty of marrying any given approach to Bible translation with current social sensitivities.

Because languages match one another poorly (cf. Baker 1992:20-42), translators' enforced choices push them into roles not unlike that of narrators: they tell the readers something about the source text; better formulated: some things ...; better yet: by necessity, only some things ... In seeking to tell something about the source text, the translator-narrator must at once hide much of it. Because of the dynamics of language,<sup>7</sup> it is impossible ever to relate through translation everything about a source text or language. A *show and tell* selection is imposed: what do I show (or: let show through) of the source text in my translation; put differently: what of the source text do I tell my readers?

With religious texts, such as the Bible, the problem is compounded by a complex matrix of attitudes and expectations on the part of the intended readers and, though differently, on the part of the translators. Whereas, on the one hand, readers who approach a sacred text as simply believers (i.e., "lay" readers) expect a relatively restricted "free play" (Detweiler 1985:214) of interpretative possibilities, in which therefore all meaning hidden in the text may be sought successfully and conclusively, exegetes, on the other hand, versed in the intricacies of word and text meanings, exegetical approaches, and hermeneutics, among other interpretative dynamics, know that all interpretation is, in a sense, a game (Le Roux 1996:41-56; cf. Le Roux 1995:174-175, in both instances drawing on Gadamer 1975; Thiselton 1992). Neither lexicon (hence, Louw & Nida 1988:viii-xx) nor exegesis (cf. Le Roux 1996:41-56) extracts from, or formulated in a more "writerly" fashion (cf. Thiselton 1992:98), affords a text firm meaning (cf. Lombaard 2006a:912-916).

This "infirmity" of meaning is of course not only a feature of the exegetical and translation processes. The text of the Bible itself is a complex document, the growth processes of which remain under debate (cf. e.g. the currently competing theories on Pentateuch composition of Wellhausen 1963, Van Seters 1983, Lemche 1988, Bar-Efrat 1989, Blum 1990, Braulik 1991, and Otto 2000, to name some contenders). However, by necessity, and to some extent by convention, one "Bible text" is decided upon for translation purposes. As argued in another place (Lombaard 2006b:22) in relation to the Hebrew Bible, though:

This 'final form' would, by implication, be the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* — a thoroughly composite text, of course, and of one textual tradition (cf. Deist 1988, with the implications spelt out most clearly on pp. 198-201; see

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7 With reference to Wendland (1987), Deibler (1988) and Baker (1992), I described language dynamics in Lombaard (2002a:755) (here, translated) as the "inherent characteristics of the source language: its grammar; the possibilities it allows for with regard to meaning, word and sound play; idioms and the idiomatic (that is, commonly employed) word use; the relationship between language, dialect, sociolect and idiolect; and many other aspects of the source language as it is encountered in the source text".

also Barr 1995:5). There simply is no, nor has there ever been, a ‘final text’ on which to call.

To summarise: Neither the translation process, nor the exegetical approach upon which the translation work is undertaken, nor the biblical text upon which the exegetical and interpretative work is undertaken (cf. De Kruijf 1998:161-169), offers what may be termed any “stability of meaning”. The relative chaos that is life applies to the text of the Bible too, and to the way we study these texts, and to the way we present the results of our investigations in modern languages. For lay Bible readers, this instability of meaning of the biblical text is, however, difficult to recognise, as indicated in Lombaard (2002b:2-3):

Combined with an inspiration theory that is more often than not literal, and with a deep-seated personal and social history of understanding of certain terms and ideas with which many Bible readers grew up, and with frequent and serious warnings by religious leaders against “errant” interpretations, which often communicatively “inoculate” these readers against any “aberrant” readings (see Lombaard 2000:609-611), it is unsurprising that only with great difficulty different possibilities of understanding parts of the Bible may be opened to believers.

The instability of meaning in and from the biblical texts seems for the most part hidden to<sup>8</sup> the general Bible reading public. Easier than to accept that what is meant by meaning is by no means clear<sup>9</sup> — the birth moment of hermeneutics — is for some lay readers simply to draw into question the motives of translators and the legitimacy of their result, if ever they come across some of the problems outlined above. Lay readers of religious texts continue to expect limited meanings,<sup>10</sup> mediated by authorised interpreters (Detweiler 1985:214),

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8 Here is an instance where a preposition can be powerful. Note the “to” and not “from”: there is no conspiracy or purposeful plot here, as one continually finds accusations of in some popular circles.

9 Though the Reformation confession of the clarity of Scripture is often called into argumentative use on this point, it offers no solace. The Reformation’s conception of the *claritas Scripturae* in no way related to an unproblematic exegetical enterprise; rather, the point of that confession was the surety of faith that could be garnered from the Bible alone. See Rossouw (1963).

10 When lay readers of religious texts do refer to a richness of meaning in, for instance, the Bible, they generally tend to mean that the first, plain meaning of a text may be pondered in greater depth. (Moreover, this interpretation would then to a greater extent be an analysis of how the “message of the text” might “apply” in their own lives; thus, personal psychologising of sorts, rather than something approaching exegetical textual investigation.) The idea of the “richness” of a Bible text as referring to a multiplicity of meanings à la deconstructionism — cf. Barthes (1974), for instance — or as shown in the history of critical exegesis, thus opening up divergent interpretative possibilities, is hardly ever considered in such circles.



usually unaware that exegetes and translators — the mediators — often fully realise that each interpretative stance taken is wholly theoretically laden (Le Roux 2001:444-457). Additionally, of course, we realise that a translation is intended to speak to precisely such people, situated for the most part unreflectingly within a complex socio-historically conditioned, and ever-evolving, matrix of language, culture, ideology, theology, *et cetera* — all of which impact on their understanding of the nature of the Bible and their expectations around its translation.

Whether the readers of translated Bible texts acknowledge it or not, the theoretical embeddedness of each translator and translation includes a range of factors, many of them unconscious, with these factors interrelated in largely undetectable ways. These include: world view, philosophy of science and of history, philosophical hermeneutics, exegetical theory, dogmatological and existential faith commitments, and a host of other ecclesial, cultural, language, personal and other factors that together constitute the frame of reference of a Bible translator. These factors referred to do not yet relate to technical language and writing skills and other practicalities involved in translation processes. The matter of Bible translation is therefore no relatively simple choice between whether to seek the truth or to communicate it (cf. Suggit 1978:4); it is even more involved than when Blier (1993:140) fleshes out “questions of truth” as including “truth, ‘truth’, untruth, counter-truth, falsehood — however defined”. If anything could characterise in any essential way the practice of Bible translation, it is this acute awareness of the instability or “infirmity” of meaning. Bible translation is fully human frailty; with Walls (1990:24): “translation is the art of the impossible”.

Often when this host of factors influencing Bible translation is considered, the implication is that these are detracting dynamics. That is, each of these influences is hinted to be, in a sense, negative, rendering the resulting translated text the poorer for it. The implied flip-side of this line of thinking is that if these factors could be eliminated, minimised or bracketed, a more reliable translated text could be rendered. My contention is, however, to the converse: that these factors should not be taken as detracting from a translation process, as the modernist Western project with its positivist ideals of objectivity and related concepts would have it (cf. Lombaard: 2002c). Indeed, all these factors are inescapable, but — importantly — they are at the very same time *required* for a process of sharing understanding (cf. Gadamer 1975; Lombaard 2006c:916-921). Put differently: all these influencing factors referred to above, and more, *enable* translation. These dynamics are the essential apparatus of interpretation. Translation as a thoroughly human enterprise should not be tempted to do without, or with less of these influencing factors.

Translators therefore have nothing to hide as they seek to convey meaning. Like Picasso’s *Demoiselles*, they should show no shame in plying their trade. The translator’s tools — the factors or dynamics referred to — are no

instruments of shame. These are what make translation at all possible. Therein lies the very humanity of the process; not a shameful humanity of detaching characteristics that we attempt to hide, but a humanity with dignity. Clothed in the shabby dress of the dynamics that constitute the costume of their craft, translators, again like Picasso's *Demoiselles*, should look the world in the eye. On offer is something many want; and it is offered in full humanity.

The point then is not to try to do Bible translation differently, that is, more in-humanly, as per modernist/public anticipation. The point is to change the views of the users of the Bible as to what it is that lies in their hands ...

### 3. THE BIBLE AS FETISH?

"[Biblical] 'literalism' is a modern heresy", Holmes (1981:13) suggests, "— perhaps the only heresy invented in modern times". Theologically, I would go further (Lombaard 2006c:914<sup>3</sup>, here translated):

It is high time that fundamentalism be recognised as the greatest heresy of our time: it finds its most basic identity not with God; put differently: it places its deepest trust not on God self, but with and on a philosophically determined concept of truth. In truth faith is placed, in the first instance; not in God. This unorthodox doctrine is thus more deep-seated than Holmes had formulated.

Although in popular culture, the word fetish is most often understood as a sexual reference, and negatively (cf. e.g. Blier 1993:143; Pietz 1996:197-198),<sup>11</sup> it has a different analytical currency for our study here. For many Bible readers the Scriptures have namely attained a fetishist character, not in the sense of itself becoming a focal point of devotion (a shrine, as it were; cf. Punt 2002:117 on this particular view of the Bible as fetish), but in the sense formulated above: it ...

entails something holy being given a greater sense of stability than it truly has, eliciting in its addressees unrealistic expectations of the fetish itself, of the matters it represents (or hides), and of the life situation it seeks to address.

To reformulate this in the light of the preceding analysis: for many, quite probably most Bible readers the instability or "infirmity" of the biblical text itself, of the scholarly investigation of the texts, and of the art of translation, remain hidden. For such readers, the ascribed holiness of the Scriptures supersedes all of these dynamics, to the point of it being irrelevant to them. To somewhat

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11 However, a substantial tradition of appropriating this concept intellectually in various analytical frameworks runs across Kant, Marx, Freud, Comte, Durkheim, Bourdieu, Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Althusser, Baudrillard and Derrida — cf. Pietz (1996:199-200).



reformulate what has been said above: “This leaves the [reader] in interpretative ecstasy: magic! Such is the nature of a fetish.”

The fetish thus imparts a ‘false consciousness’, leaving its interpreters with a view of life that is, misleadingly, secure. Here is an avenue, a medium ... for stability, truth, peace ...

Clearly this analysis can be elaborated on further. But, the point has been made: the expectations and associations popularly attached to the Bible are most often unrealistic. In an age of growing fundamentalisms, such misconceptions are not only spiritually un nourishing, but can also prove to have politically explosive consequences. If the Bible remains fetishised in the public imagination, it will continue to feed fundamentalist conceptions of Bible, God, faith and related matters (cf. Lombaard 2006c:914-916). From this, no good could come.

There are, naturally, many ways in which modern fundamentalisms should, for the love of God and humanity, be countered. One of the more obvious ways are through Bible translation, given the influence translations have not only quantitatively, that is on the number of people touched, but also qualitatively — the existential depths to which readers are touched. Rather less obvious, though, is how to go about this by means of Bible translation.

Five suggestions are briefly recounted:

- the explanation of these dynamics of Bible translation in an introduction appended to each new published translation (cf. Carroll 2002:57);
- education/catechism courses in churches that do not only emphasise the divine nature of Scripture, as tends to be the case, but also the very human history of this library, and does so in a historical way;
- encouraging, where feasible, the simultaneous use of different translations, possibly based on different translation theories;
- encouraging the use by Bible readers of commentaries (cf. Berlin 2002:175-191), which may be published as accompanying editions to new translations, and
- the use of annotated translations/study Bibles (cf. Lombaard 2002b:7-9; Joubert 2001:324), with as Afrikaans language examples Vosloo and Van Rensburg’s *Die Bybel in Praktyk* (1993) and their *Bybellennium Eenvolume-kommentaar* (1999).

Perhaps through these ways and others, the Bible will lose in the popular mind its fetishist character, thus undermining fundamentalisms. The nature of faith is such that it does not need modernist concepts of truth, as is often popularly assumed. In fact, the very nature of faith is such that it does altogether better without such notions.

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*Keywords*

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