From Valla to Nida:

Biblical translation in the Renaissance and the twentieth century

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Abstract: *In the twentieth century, Eugene Nida presented his translation theory as a new direction in the history of biblical translation. His work became very influential. This article investigates to what degree his theory differed from traditional theory on biblical translation, comparing it with the Renaissance debate. Although Nida worked in a very different context, giving his theory scientific legitimacy by grounding it in modern theories of language and communication, his assumptions about theology and translatability are similar to those of Renaissance authors like Lorenzo Valla (1407–1457).*

Introduction

When Eugene Nida (1914–2011) wrote *Toward a Science of Translating* (1964), he presented it as a new direction in biblical translation: from now on, translating the Bible would be a scientific discipline.[1] He was aware that there had already been a long tradition of biblical translation, but he considered his own work completely different in nature. His translation theory became very influential: it helped shape the field of translation studies and current discussions of biblical translation theory are still building on it.[2] Although Nida and other twentieth-century theorists did not look back in time, they were concerned with the same questions and problems as earlier authors who reflected on translation. The aim of this paper is to discover what modern and older views on biblical translation have in common by comparing biblical translation theory across periods. Specifically, I compare theory written in the Renaissance with that written in the twentieth century. In the Renaissance, debates on biblical translation were especially intense because of the new approaches adopted by the humanists, and because of the Reformation. In the twentieth century, biblical translation theory took flight when it was embedded in new theories of language and communication. Yet I shall argue that twentieth-century biblical translation theory has much in common with

[1] Nida 1964. This work is discussed below, together with Nida & Taber 1969 (p. 106ff.).
[2] For an overview of Nida's reception, see Pattemore 2007.

that of the Renaissance. Authors in both periods discussed the same questions and arguments; it was simply that their emphasis differed because of contextual factors and the nature of theory.

For convenience's sake, I use the word 'theory' indiscriminately for reflections on methodology and for explanatory frameworks. This includes prescriptive and descriptive theory. It is often difficult to distinguish between the two, because authors tend to defend their own practice by combining descriptive and prescriptive elements: they describe how translation works (descriptive) in order to draw up rules for what a good translation is (prescriptive). This holds true for almost all pre-modern translation theory. In the modern period, there has been a general tendency to move from prescriptive to descriptive theory in the field of translation – and in the humanities at large.[3] But even in the twentieth century, biblical translation was not completely descriptive.[4]

Scholars have applied insights from modern translation studies to biblical translations from earlier periods before, but in these cases they combine descriptive modern theory with historical translation practice. They do not compare any theory of biblical translation across periods.[5] Historical overviews of translation theory tend to summarize all developments before the modern era under one heading (such as 'traditional theory'),[6] limit themselves to the pre-modern period,[7] or leave out the historical and intellectual context of the authors they discuss.[8] With regard to biblical translation, in particular, historians who concentrate on this genre tend to treat the modern period as an afterthought.[9] As a result, the similarities between modern and Renaissance biblical translation theories have not yet been explored.

In this essay, in which I base my comparison of the two periods on a small sample of authors meant to be illustrative rather than exhaustive, I intend to correct this situation. For the Renaissance, I limit myself to authors who wrote in Latin between 1450 and 1530, whom I consider as representative for the debate. These are Lorenzo Valla (1407–1457), Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536), and Petrus Sutor (Pierre Cousturier, 1475–1537). For the modern period, my case study is Nida, because of his influence

[3] Bod 2013.
[4] Pattemore 2007, 217–20.
[5] E.g. Barr 1979; van der Louw 2007; Olofsson 2009.
[6] Steiner 1975; Snell-Hornby 1995.
[7] Norton 1981; 1984; Rener 1989.
[8] Kelly 1979.
[9] For example in the works of Werner Schwarz and Anthony Pym, which are discussed below.

on twentieth-century translation studies. My article will introduce a framework as a tool for comparing various positions in the age-long debate on biblical translation, discuss each position, illustrating it with an example from the Renaissance, and then use the same framework to describe Nida's position. Finally, I will explore the contextual factors that influenced the debate on biblical translation in the Renaissance and the twentieth century.

The framework

Over the ages, authors discussing biblical translation have put forward various principles or approaches, depending on their beliefs about the inspiration of the source text, the status of the translation, the intervention of the Holy Spirit in the translation process, or the tradition of the church, which sanctions translations by using them. In order to compare these approaches over time, scholars have developed frameworks for organizing and classifying biblical translation theory. I will discuss two here, before introducing my own.

Werner Schwarz, who wrote several studies on the history of biblical translation theory, concentrated on two historical periods when discussions about Bible translation were at their fiercest: the fourth to fifth centuries CE and the early sixteenth century.[10] He distinguished three principles. The first is that of inspiration, meaning that not only the source text, but also the translation of the Bible is divinely inspired. Representatives of this principle are Augustine and Luther. The second is that of philology, meaning that the Bible is to be translated in the same way as any other text. The success of the translation depends on the translator's linguistic skill, not on his holiness or orthodoxy. Representatives of this tradition are Jerome and Erasmus. The third principle is that of traditionalism. Its defenders believe that the Bible has been translated perfectly once and for all and that this one translation is sanctioned by tradition. According to them, there is no need to make a new translation.

More recently, Anthony Pym, working in the field of historical descriptive translation studies, proposed a framework that dichotomized representational and non-representational epistemologies of Bible translating, in which 'epistemology [is] understood [...] as a mode of construing knowledge from a text.'[11] Representationalists believe that the language of the Bible refers to something outside of the text, which can be captured and communicated in a translation. There is nothing sacred about the words of the Bible; it is their meaning that is inspired and supernatural. This meaning can be translated

[10] Schwarz 1955; 1963; 1985.
[11] Pym 2007, 195.

according to linguistic principles. Non-representationalists, by contrast, believe that the Bible is exceptional, that its words and meaning are related in a supernatural way, and that receptors have access to the meaning of the text through revelation. For non-representationalists, not only the message and meaning of the text are sacred, but also the very words and language in which it is written. This sacredness can be passed on to the translation of the text through an act of inspired translation. As a result, the translation is itself inspired and its sacredness is not limited to the meaning of the text, but extends to its language, just as in the case of the source text.

In my opinion, the frameworks proposed by Schwarz and Pym are helpful, but insufficient for comparing authors and tracing developments over time. There are two problems. The first is that the categories are not very precise. For example, in Pym's framework Augustine fits both the representational and non-representational profile.[12] In Schwarz's, the difference between the inspirational and traditional principles is unclear: a translation can be believed to be sacred because it was inspired when it was made (inspiration), or because the Holy Spirit dwells in the Church who sanctioned it (tradition). The result is the same: in both cases, the translation cannot be questioned or corrected. The second, more important problem is that the frameworks proposed by Schwarz and Pym do not distinguish between ideas about the supernatural status of the Bible and ideas about translatability. Two authors may agree that translating the Bible is a matter of philology, not inspiration, but still hold very different opinions about the translatability of the source text, as I will demonstrate below.

As a solution, I propose a grid with two axes (Figure 1):

Translatability

Philology		*Inspiration*
	Philology and translatability | Inspiration and translatability	
	Philology and provisionality | Inspiration and provisionality	

Provisionality

Figure 1: The positions in the debate

The vertical axis represents beliefs about translatability. This ranges from the possibility of replacing the original altogether to provisionality of translation.[13] The horizontal axis represents beliefs about the role of

[12] Pym 2007, 205–6.

[13] Cf. Botley's discussion of the various 'attitudes towards the original text' that existed in the Renaissance. Botley distinguishes three categories: translations that replace the

inspiration in the translation process. This axis ranges from 'philology' to 'inspiration'. On the philological end of the spectrum, we find authors who approach biblical translation as they would the translation of any text – the same problems and difficulties apply. This view goes back to Jerome (347–420), who in his preface to his Pentateuch famously remarked that 'it is one thing to be a prophet, and another to be a translator.'[14] On the inspirational end, biblical translation is fundamentally different from translating other texts. The translator needs to be inspired (or holy, or orthodox), or the translation needs to be sanctioned by tradition. If this view is combined with optimism about translatability, the result is a belief in the existence of a perfect translation. This view is found in the work of Philo of Alexandria (20 BC – 50 AD), who described the translation process of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. According to Philo, the translators worked under the guidance of the Spirit of God, producing a perfect translation in the process, where each Greek word fitted each Chaldean (Hebrew) word perfectly in spite of the differences between the languages. The translation was so faithful that the Greek could be translated back into the original by someone schooled in both languages. Philo draws a parallel with geometry and logic, where concepts are universal and unchangeable.[15]

The grid with two axes makes it possible to distinguish between views that are apparently similar, but based on different presuppositions. For example, two authors can agree that it is impossible to render the text of the Bible accurately in translation (provisionality), but for different reasons. One may believe it is impossible for philological reasons, such as the incommensurability of languages (provisionality and philology), whereas the other may believe that translation is impossible because the very words in the original language are inspired (provisionality and inspiration).

Philology and translatability: Valla

The Renaissance debate on biblical translation started when Italian humanists began to apply their new philological methods to the common Latin translation of the Bible, the Vulgate.[16] It had already been corrected by monastic scholars in the late Middle Ages, but they had limited themselves to

original, translations that compete with the original, and translations that supplement the original. Botley 2004, 164–77.

[14] 'Aliud est enim esse vatem; aliud est esse interpretem', Fischer and Weber (1969), vol. 1, 3. There, however, the text reads *vates*.

[15] Philo, *Vita Mosis* II, 37–40.

[16] In the fifteenth century, the Vulgate was not yet referred to by that name, but I use it here for convenience's sake.

eliminating textual corruptions. The Italian humanists questioned the accuracy and style of the translation itself.[17] In their reflections on biblical translation, they were optimistic about translatability, and they believed that the Bible should be approached as any other literary text.

The most important example of an author who held this view is Lorenzo Valla (1407–1457), who wrote a series of annotations (often corrections) to the Latin New Testament in the 1450s.[18] This work was criticized by Poggio Bracciolini, who accused Valla of meddling with Sacred Scripture. Valla defended himself as follows:

> Itaque ne multus sim, siquid emendo non Scripturam Sacram emendo, sed illius interpretationem, neque in eam contumeliosus sum, sed pius potius, nec aliud facio nisi quod melius quam prior interpres transfero, ut mea translatio sit si vera fuerit appellanda Sancta Scriptura, non illius. Etsi proprie Scriptura Sancta sit ea que Sancti ipsi vel Hebraice vel Grece scripserunt; nam Latinum nihil tale est.[19]
>
> So in short, if I revise anything I do not revise Sacred Scripture, but its translation, and this does not make me insolent, but rather dutiful, and the only thing I do is translate better than the first translator, so that if it is accurate, my translation should be called Sacred Scripture, not his. Nevertheless, Sacred Scripture is really what the saints wrote in Hebrew and Greek, for the Latin is nothing of the sort.

Valla makes the point that the translation is not sacred – it is the original that is inspired and should be referred to as Sacred Scripture. Although he does not explicitly enter into the question of translatability in this passage, he is implicitly optimistic about it: he believes he can do a better job than the earlier translator ('melius quam prior interpres transfero') and that his translation can be accurate ('si vera fuerit'). Valla's aim was to make the Latin text understandable for those who could not read Greek. The literal translation method of the Vulgate had led to all kinds of misunderstandings in exegesis,

[17] For an overview of scholars who corrected the text of the Vulgate in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, see Linde 2012. The biblical scholarship of Italian humanists is discussed in Hamilton 1996 and Monfasani 2008.

[18] Valla's annotations were discovered by Erasmus in 1504 and published in 1505. Erasmus' edition of Valla's work was reprinted in the twentieth century in Valla's *Opera omnia* (Valla 1962). An earlier redaction of Valla's notes, probably written in the 1440s, was published by Perosa (Valla 1970). For Valla's biblical scholarship, see Fois 1969; di Napoli 1971; Camporeale 1972, and more recently Celenza 1994; Cortesi 1997; Celenza 2012; den Haan 2016.

[19] Valla, *Antidotum primum* I, 136 (Valla 1978). All translations of Latin quotations are my own.

which he meant to remedy.[20] The implication is that it should be possible to read the Latin as a replacement of the source text.

Other fifteenth-century humanists held roughly the same position as Valla. Giannozzo Manetti (1396–1459) and Aurelio Lippi Brandolini (c. 1454–1497) produced new Latin versions of parts of the Bible. Manetti reflected on his translation of the Psalter in a treatise, *Apologeticus* (1458), and Brandolini defended his Old Testament paraphrase in a preface.[21] In these texts, they treated biblical translation as any other genre, emphasizing the importance of Latin elegance.[22]

Provisionality: Erasmus

By the early sixteenth century, humanism had become more influential in the European universities, and humanists concerned themselves more and more with biblical scholarship. This resulted in revisions of the Vulgate such as Erasmus' *Novum Instrumentum* (1516), the Complutensian Polyglot (1522), and the revised Vulgate issued by Henri Estienne (1528). But at the same time, authors in this period were less optimistic about translatability than the fifteenth-century humanists. They argued that no translation, however skilfully made, can convey the full meaning of the original text. For this reason, readers of the Bible cannot rely on translations made by others, but need direct access to the sources. One author who promoted reading the Bible in the original languages was Mattheus Adrianus, in an *Oratio* delivered in 1519 and printed in Wittenberg in 1520:

> [...] ac mysterium saepenumero in syllabis latet, ac literis et punctis in ipsis linguae idiomatibus seu proprietatibus. Quid hic faciet theologus linguarum ignarus? Nimirum, aut fide hallucinetur oportet, aut alieno duci se paciatur ingenio.[23]
>
> [...] and oftentimes the mystery lies hidden in the syllables, and letters and points, in the very idioms and peculiarities of the language. What

[20] Valla wrote this in his preface to the *Annotationes*, of which two versions survive. They were edited by Perosa together with the text of the annotations (Valla 1970). They are discussed and translated into English by Celenza (2012).

[21] For the preface to Brandolini's text, see Rummel 1995a. Manetti's text was edited by Alfonso de Petris (Manetti 1981); a new Latin edition with facing English translation was published recently (Manetti 2016).

[22] Whereas Rummel (1995a) discusses Brandolini's preface as typical of the humanist philological approach to Scripture, Monfasani believes that Brandolini merely praises rhetoric in general, without making an argument about Scripture specifically (Monfasani 2008, 37). For Manetti's translation theory, see De Petris 1975; Botley 2004; De Petris 2008, and the introduction to Manetti 2016.

[23] This text has been edited and discussed by De Vocht 1951, 533–43 (540).

> is a theologian who is ignorant of languages to do then? Surely, he must wander about in blind faith, or suffer himself to be led by the abilities of another.

Adrianus' *Oratio* was part of a broader debate on language studies. Other authors who promoted the study of the biblical languages were Alard of Amsterdam, Tranquillus Andronicus, and Mosellanus.[24]

The incommensurability of languages was only one reason for studying the Bible in the original, however; another was the special nature of the biblical message, whose words in the original language are too full of meaning to be translated. For example, Cardinal Ximenes (Jiménes de Cisneros, 1436–1517), in his prologue to the Complutensian Polyglot, wrote that all languages have their own peculiarities of expression, especially the language spoken by Christ. For this reason, no translation can render the full meaning of Sacred Scripture.[25] For Ximenes, biblical translation is always provisional, both for philological reasons and because of the inspiration of the sacred text.

The most important author on biblical translation in this period was Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536), who published his own Greek New Testament with Latin translation in 1516.[26] Erasmus believed that no translation of the Bible could be perfect and final. In his translations of pagan classical texts, he was more confident about translatability, but even there, he was aware of the limitations of translation, and considered it an intermediate tool, necessary only until enough readers had mastered the Greek language for themselves.[27] His reservations applied even more strongly to biblical translation. He placed an edition of the Greek in the page facing the Latin translation and suggested alternative translations of numerous passages in the attached annotations.[28] In his *Ratio verae theologiae* (1519), he argued that a theologian needs at least a passive understanding of Greek and Hebrew, because it is impossible to understand the Bible without it.[29]

Erasmus' view on the role of inspiration in the translation process is ambiguous. On the one hand, he placed himself in the tradition of Jerome,

[24] For the debate on language learning in the context of biblical studies, see De Vocht 1951, 298–358.

[25] The text of the prologue is in the edition by Botfield (1861), 41-3, there 41.

[26] Erasmus, *Novum Instrumentum*, Basel, Froben, 1516. It would be reprinted in 1519, 1522, 1527 and 1535. The literature on Erasmus' New Testament is vast. Studies that concern his translation method and principles in particular are Rummel 1986 and de Jonge 1984; 2016.

[27] For Erasmus' general translation theory and practice, see Rummel 1985.

[28] For the nature of Erasmus' revision of the Vulgate, see de Jonge 2016.

[29] De Vocht 1951, 304.

arguing that translating the Bible was first and foremost a philological affair.[30] On the other hand, he believed that something of the inspiration of the original is lost in the translation process. He wrote that the words spoken by Christ himself – in the original language – were more sacred than those we read in translation:

> [...] diuinae literae nescio quid habent natiuae fragrantiae, nescio quid spirant suum ac genuinum, si eo sermone legantur quo primum scripserunt ii qui partim e sacro illo ac coelesti hauserunt ore, partim eiusdem afflati spiritu nobis tradiderunt.[31]
>
> The Scriptures have about them some sort of natural fragrance, they breathe forth something genuine and all their own when read in the language in which their authors originally wrote them. These authors took them down directly from the sacred and heavenly lips of Christ, or they passed them on to us inspired by His Spirit.

The New Testament was itself a translation from the original Aramaic into Greek, as Erasmus was aware. He believed that the earliest translators, the evangelists and apostles, had been inspired. But this inspiration did not extend to later translators, who rendered the Bible into Latin or the vernacular languages.

This is where Erasmus' view differed from that of other sixteenth-century humanists. They all agreed on the importance of philology and language study, and they encouraged their readers to consult the Bible in the original languages. But for Erasmus, the Vulgate was a fallible, provisional translation. Although he did not mean to supplant it with his own Latin version, he provided an alternative for study purposes.[32] For this, he was attacked by other humanists who had no objection to studying the original languages, but who believed that it was impossible to improve on the Vulgate.[33]

Inspiration and translatability: Sutor

We find a more extreme defence of the Vulgate in the work of Sutor (Pierre Couturier, 1475–1537), who was so convinced of its special status that he

[30] For Erasmus' ideas on biblical translation in particular, see Rummel 1985, 89–102.

[31] Ep. 373 (Allen 1906–1958 vol. 2, 170, ll. 167–170). This letter functioned as a preface to Erasmus' *Novum Instrumentum*. See the edition of the first part of Erasmus' *Annotationes*, ASD VI 5 (Erasmus 2000), 60.

[32] Erasmus discussed the purpose of his New Testament in the *Apologia* (1516, Erasmus, pages 163–73 in Holborn 1933).

[33] Such as Stunica, who worked on the Complutensian Polyglot together with Ximenes. Rummel 1989a, 145–77.

considered the source text as irrelevant. Sutor was optimistic about translatability because of the role of inspiration. In *De tralatione Bibliae* (1525), he reacted to the biblical scholarship of Erasmus, although he did not mention him by name. Sutor's book was approved by the theology faculty in Paris.[34] He was optimistic about translation – but only about that of the past, objecting to all new translations of the Bible and to vernacular translations in particular. Sutor believed that a translator who does not lead a holy life, is not orthodox, or undertakes the task for the wrong reasons, will not succeed. But above all, he needs the support of the Holy Spirit:

> Atqui maxime opus est diuino auxilio in transferenda diuina scriptura. Denique exigitur coelestis gratia, et ea quidem peculiaris quae et deligat et dirigat ipsum interpretem. Non enim debet accedere nisi diuinitus et selectus et adiutus. Alioqui non spiritu diuino diuinam tralationem, sed humano spiritu prophanum opus efficeret. Eodem enim spiritu debet (Ieronymo teste) interpretari scriptura quo primum diuinitus hominibus reuelata est. At quis obsecro nunc est, vel etiam futurus speratur, cui haec omnia conuenire possint, quae in sacro Ieronymo inuenta sunt?[35]
>
> But most of all translating sacred scripture calls for divine help. In a word, it requires grace from above, and particularly the kind that elects and directs the translator himself. No one must therefore undertake the task who is not divinely chosen and aided. Otherwise he would not produce a divine translation in a divine spirit, but a profane work in a human one. For as Jerome writes, scripture must be translated in the same spirit through which it was first divinely revealed to man. And who, I ask, is there alive now, or expected to be alive in the future, who could combine all these qualities in his person, which are found in Saint Jerome?

Jerome had produced a perfect translation because he was chosen and inspired. Without inspiration, however, it is impossible to translate the Bible.

Nida: philology and translation

Now that the main positions in the Renaissance debate have been set out, we turn to the twentieth century and the work of Nida. Educated in New Testament Greek as well as linguistics, Nida started publishing scholarly articles on linguistics and biblical translation in the late 1940s. He wrote his most influential books from the 1960s to the early 1980s, two of which form the basis of my discussion of his work, *Toward a Science of Translating* and *The Theory and Practice of Translation*.[36]

[34] For Sutor's work, see Rummel 1989b, 61–73.
[35] *De tralatione Bibliae*, Paris 1525, Fo. LXVr-v.
[36] Nida 1964; Nida & Taber 1969.

Nida proposed to systematize and professionalize the discipline of biblical translation by grounding it in contemporary theories of language and communication, such as lexical semantics and componential analysis. He believed that the meaning or message of the source text can be separated from its linguistic form. The latter is irrelevant for the translator, who should concentrate on the meaning alone, in order to reproduce the equivalent effect of the source text on its original receptors. Nida proposed that there were in fact two different types of equivalence. For the 'equivalent of effect', he coined the term 'dynamic equivalence'. For equivalence based on word order, grammatical form, or figures of speech, he used 'formal equivalence'.[37]

Nida was aware of historical debates about biblical translation, but considered them no longer relevant. In his chapter entitled *The Tradition of Translation in the Western World*, he summarized them under the headings of inspiration vs. philology, tradition vs. contemporary authority, and theology vs. grammar. [38] Yet although he placed himself outside this tradition of translation, he could not avoid choosing sides on the questions of translatability and inspiration. He was optimistic about the former, believing that '[anything] that can be said in one language can always be said in another [...].'[39] This belief was based on assumptions about commonalities in language and similarities between cultures:

> Underlying all the complications of translation is the fundamental fact that languages differ radically one from the other. In fact, so different are they that some insist that one cannot communicate adequately in one language what has been said originally in another. Nevertheless, as linguists and anthropologists have discovered, that which unites mankind is much greater than that which divides, and hence there is, even in cases of very disparate languages and cultures, a basis for communication.[40]

As for inspiration, Nida approached biblical translation philologically, believing that only the source text is inspired, not its translation. In a section on 'wrong theological presuppositions,' he writes that his view 'in no way minimizes the doctrine of inspiration, but it does mean that one must look at

[37] Nida 1964, 156–92; Nida & Taber 1969, 12–32. Nida's discussion of formal and dynamic equivalence was normative – although it varied from work to work. In *Toward a Science of Translating*, Nida observed a tendency toward dynamic equivalence in translation (Nida 1964, 160); in *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, dynamic equivalence became a criterion for judging translations (Nida & Taber 1969, 173).

[38] Nida 1964, 11–29.

[39] Nida & Taber 1969, 4.

[40] Nida 1964, 2.

the words of the Bible as instruments by which the message is communicated and not as ends in themselves.'[41]

Nida's *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (1969) opens with a chapter entitled *A New Concept of Translating*.[42] There, he lists several 'new' attitudes to biblical translation: 'each language has its own genius' (p. 3); 'to communicate effectively one must respect the genius of each language' (p. 4); 'anything that can be said in one language can be said in another' (p. 4); 'the languages of the Bible are subject to the same limitations as any other natural language' (p. 5), and must be 'understood and analysed in the same manner as any other ancient tongues' (p. 5).

Although Nida presented these attitudes as new, he shared them with some of the humanists discussed above. The fifteenth-century Italian humanists, Valla in particular, shared Nida's belief in translatability and his emphasis on natural language. There is, however, a difference in emphasis. Nida's work addresses the question of translatability rather than inspiration. This holds true for twentieth-century debates in general. Later criticism of Nida concentrated on his optimism about translatability and his belief in the separation of meaning and form. Exegetes and literary scholars in particular emphasized the importance of literary language and genre conventions in the Bible. But Nida's theological presuppositions were not questioned.[43] This makes modern theory very different from Renaissance theory.

Aim, context, and the nature of theory

This brings us to the contextual factors that influenced the theory of both periods. Some of these are obvious: debates on biblical translation reflect the religious and academic conflicts of the time. In the early sixteenth century, they were influenced by the Reformation. New translations, especially those made into the vernacular, were immediately associated with the Lutheran movement. This is the context in which Sutor wrote his work: he aimed to defend the tradition of the church against Lutheranism.

As regards academic discussions, biblical translation was one of the main topics in the conflict between humanists and scholastics about the university curriculum. In the late middle ages, biblical studies had been the territory of academic theologians, who read the Bible in the context of scholasticism. They were not interested in the clarity or elegance of the translation or in its original languages. Humanist authors promoted a very different university

[41] Nida & Taber 1969, 101. There is also a short section on *Pressures from Tradition* in Nida 1964, 179–80.
[42] Nida 1964, 1–11.
[43] Pattemore 2007, 228–62.

curriculum with more emphasis on rhetoric and grammar. Eventually, they also claimed the right to engage in biblical studies, arguing that traditional scholastic theology was outdated and irrelevant. Thus, their reflections on biblical translation were written in a context of academic rivalry.[44] This is the context in which Erasmus wrote his reflections on biblical translation.[45]

Other contextual factors are less obvious. Historical theories should be understood in the context of the literary conventions and preferences of the time. For this reason, historians of translation have offered frameworks that concentrate on the interactions between translation theory and contemporary literary conventions, especially the tradition of classical rhetoric.[46] The earliest Renaissance debates in biblical translation were about models, language and style, and the nature of the *studia humanitatis*. This is the context in which Valla wrote his reflections on biblical translation. He was criticized by Poggio – another humanist. They disagreed on the authority of classical authors, which was sacred to Poggio but questioned by Valla.[47]

We should keep in mind that modern theorists also write within a broader intellectual context. Nida's aim was to provide translation studies with scientific legitimacy. The aim of his work was '[to bring] to the subject of translation numerous insights which have become increasingly significant in a number of related fields.'[48] The off-hand way in which Nida dismisses the age-long debate on the inspiration of biblical translation reflects his scientific aspirations: in a twentieth-century context, such questions were not considered academic. Scientific legitimacy was of course not Nida's only aim: working for the United Bible Society, he developed tools for translators in the mission field. This may have been an additional reason for him to present his ideas on translation in a form that was acceptable to the community of academic linguists and communication scientists: his underlying motives could have made him intellectually suspect.[49]

This brings us to a final fundamental difference between the Renaissance and the twentieth century: the form and nature of theory. I have used this word to cover a wide variety of reflections on biblical translation, in order to

[44] For this conflict, see e.g. Rummel 1995b.

[45] For Erasmus' position in this debate in particular, see Rummel 1989a and Rummel 1989b.

[46] Rener 1989 is the most elaborate study. For a study of Renaissance biblical translation in particular in connection with rhetoric, see Eskhult 2012.

[47] For the conflict between Valla and Poggio, see for example the introduction to Wesseling's edition of Valla's *Antidotum primum* (Valla 1978). See also Cesarini Martinelli 1980 and Cortesi 1997.

[48] Nida 1964, 5.

[49] Lawrence Venuti criticized Nida for these underlying motives (Venuti 1995, 21-22).

identify developments and similarities across periods. However, using the word 'theory' for the reflections of Renaissance authors is problematic. Renaissance authors wrote their reflections on translation in prefaces to the reader and dedicatory letters to patrons. Their comments are often highly rhetorical and serve the occasion. This holds true for almost all Renaissance texts, including the examples we have seen above. When Valla wrote that his translation was as much sacred Scripture as the Vulgate, he was reacting to a polemical attack by Poggio, which was part of a long series of invectives from both sides. They only touched upon the subject of biblical translation in the midst of numerous other accusations and differences of opinion. When Adrianus emphasized the importance of learning the source languages of the Bible, he did so in his capacity of professor of Hebrew at the *Collegium Trilingue Lovaniense*, promoting the education he offered there. Ximenes' claim that the Bible needed to be studied in the original appeared in a preface to a multilingual Bible, and was intended to justify his own work.

This does not mean that these authors were insincere in their reflections on biblical translation. Their statements are illustrative of their opinions and of the broader intellectual context of the time, but they are hardly academic scientific statements. Reading Renaissance sources as systematic theory does not do justice to the historical situation.[50]

Conclusions

Once discussions of biblical translation are compared from the points of view of translatability and inspiration, it becomes clear that modern theory, as represented here by Nida, is part of a tradition that goes back to antiquity, and that it corresponds to the views of fifteenth-century Italian humanists. But, as we have demonstrated, the emphasis is different: in modern theory it is placed mostly on translatability versus provisionality, whereas in Renaissance debates it is on the question of philology versus inspiration.

This difference in emphasis results from the context in which the debates took place. The authors we have discussed not only reflected on biblical translation, they also questioned the authority of classical models, claimed

[50] One example of reading modern academic practice into Renaissance texts is Norton 1981, where the author writes that a Renaissance author's 'theoretical program' is a 'concerted attempt to improve on Bruni by formulating a doctrine of critical good sense not unrelated to St. Jerome's quiet relativism.' Norton 1981, 197. Here it seems as if the Renaissance author (Manetti) reacted to the scientific theories of Bruni and Jerome in the same way as modern translation theorists comment on each other's work. But Manetti used these sources in a way that fitted the rhetorical practice of the time, where Jerome was an authority. He does not even mention Bruni by name. For Manetti's translation theory, see above, footnote 22.

territory in the university curriculum, defended the traditions of the Catholic Church against Protestant attacks, or claimed scientific legitimacy for translation studies. Furthermore, these Renaissance authors did not write in order to develop a systematic theory with scientifically grounded principles. They wrote according to the literary conventions and scholarly standards of their time. What both periods have in common is that the intensity of the debates on biblical translation reflects changes in the approach to the sacred text and the discipline of translation.

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