

AUTHOR:Victor E. d'Assonville **AFFILIATION:**

University of the Free State (UFS)
Faculty of Theology and Religion
Department of Historical and
Constructive Theology.
RTS Heidelberg

CORRESPONDENCE TO:

vieddas.3@gmail.com

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'Monumentum aere perennius' – Discussions and Decisions by the Synod of Dort on the Translation of the Bible¹

ABSTRACT

The Synod of Dordrecht 1618/19 was not only the most ecumenical synod of reformed churches in history, but is also famous for reaching closure with the formulation of the Canons of Dort, on the highly controversial discussions of election, grace, predestination, free will and other related theological themes that disturbed the Netherlands during the first two decades of the 17th century. Unfortunately, in the wake of this, other crucial matters that also were dealt with at the Synod tend to be obscure. The critical issue of Bible translation is one such example. Although this theme appears to be in the shadow of the contentious debates on election etc., till today the importance of the decisions of the Synod on the principles of Bible translation, which gave rise to the well-known Dutch "Statenvertaling" (State Translation), remain unassailed. These include principles such as translating from the original languages, staying as close as possible to the original source text, remaining as faithful as possible to the typical Hebrew and Greek idiom, as well as the use of an unadulterated, understandable language as target language – with special consideration of and respect for the Names of the Lord, while also taking other important translations into account.

Key concepts: Statenvertaling (Dutch State Translation); Dordrecht/Dort ; Bible translation ; Translation principles

'Monumentum aere perennius' – Diskussies oor en besluite deur die Sinode van Dordrecht oor Bybelvertaling Opsomming

Die Sinode van Dordrecht 1618/19 was nie slegs die mees ekumeniese sinode van gereformeerde kerke in die geskiedenis nie, maar dit is ook beroemd vir die vasstelling van die Dordtse Leerreëls wat terselfdertyd as afsluiting gedien het vir die hoogs omstrede diskussies oor die uitverkiesing, genade, voorsienigheid, vrye wil en ander samehangende teologiese onderwerpe – temas wat groot onrus veroorsaak het in die Nederlande gedurende die eerste twee dekades van die sewentiende eeu. Ongelukkig bring die bekendheid van die Dordtse Leerreëls mee dat ander sleutelsake wat ook deur die sinode hanteer is in die vergetelheid raak. Die sentrale kwessie van Bybelvertaling is een só 'n aspek. Ofskoon dit lyk of hierdie saak in die skaduwee van die kontensieuse diskussies oor uitverkiesing ensovoorts staan, is die betekenis van die sinodebesluite oor die beginsels van Bybelvertaling (wat uiteindelik in die Statevertaling uitgemond het) 'n uitgemaakte saak. Dit sluit beginsels in soos om uit die oorspronklike tale te vertaal, om so na as moontlik aan die oorspronklike brontekste te bly, terwyl ook so getrou as moontlik die tipiese Hebreeuse en Griekse idioom weergegee word en terselfdertyd van 'n suiwer, verstaanbare segswyse en uitdrukking in die doeltaal gebruik gemaak word. Hierby kom besondere aandag aan en respek vir die Name van die Here terwyl ook ander belangrike vertalings in ag geneem word in die vertaalproses.

Kernbegrippe: Statevertaling; Dordrecht / Dordt; Bybelvertaling; Vertaalbeginsels

¹ This article is based on research done for a Reformation Conference in South African during August 2018 (Pretoria, Cape Town and Vryburg), in commemoration of the Dordrecht Synod (1618/19), as well as a paper delivered in Heidelberg, Germany, on 26 July 2019 at the international conference 400 Years Synod of Dort (in Heidelberg and Dordrecht). A part of this research was published in a conference volume (d'Assonville, 2019:49-77).

1. Introduction

1.1 Return to Dort ... the “truth of 1618 and 1619”

It was in a remote part of the Bo-Karoo, a semi-desert in Southern Africa, that a remarkable piece of church history was re-enacted approximately 160 years ago. Writing at that time, Hester du Plessis (née Venter), the wife of elder I.D. du Plessis, described the events that resulted in the establishment of the Colesberg Reformed Church on 8 December 1860 as an appeal to the “truth of 1618 and 1619” (in Postma, 1905). It is clearly the Synod of Dort that she was referring to – the *Three Forms of Unity* and the *Church Order of Dort* in particular.

“Back to Dort!” This truly was the motto that expressed the diligent endeavours of a multitude of congregation members in the middle of the 19th century – in the classis of Graaff Reinet at that stage as well as, simultaneously, in the ZAR (Transvaal) and the OFS (Oranje Vrystaat/Orange Free State). As a theological motivation for the average member, “God’s infallible Word” was particularly useful, with an appeal to the Belgic Confession, Article 7, 27-29. This slogan was confessional in character; this naturally implies a specific concern for the reformed confession, but also in a broader sense the “mutual agreement” (= common accord) regarding the church order. It assumes the absolute primacy of the Lord’s Word, the Bible. But, and this is germane to our subject, both bring to light a very important facet: the availability of the Scriptures in the language of the believers; the Bible in their own language.

This historical snippet is an example of similar reformation movements that took place in different parts of the world in the nineteenth century:

- In the Netherlands (the “Secession” of 1834);
- in Scotland (the “Disruption” within the Church of Scotland in 1843);
- in North America (leading to the establishment of the CRC in 1857);
- in Switzerland (1831);
- in German areas, e.g. Earldom (*Grafschaft*) Bentheim and East Friesland between 1838 and 1861;
- in the Netherlands (with the *Doleantie* of 1886).

1.2 The Word of God in the vernacular

Right from the start of the Reformation it was evident that the Bible’s availability in the vernacular would be a priority – which necessarily entailed the priority of accurate and faithful Bible translation. This too was the case at Dordrecht. And 230 years after the Synod of Dort, in the nineteenth century, this continued to be the abiding concern of a gathering of simple believers in the Karoo, apparently without a single theologian or preacher in their midst. In 1889, about 30 years after the events in Colesberg, S.J. du Toit in the Paarl – one of the founders of the GRA (*Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners*) and the father of Totius (J.D. du Toit) – published a book called “The Bible in Afrikaans”. In this work he mounts a spirited argument for this noble ideal (cf. d’Assonville, 1999:244).

2. Bible translations

2.1 The Synod of Dort and Scripture – the preamble

Early on in the proceedings, less than a week after the official opening of the Synod of Dort on 13 November 1618, the sixth session of the synod occurred on 19 November 1618. The Acta (minutes) of the Synod read: “After the Praeses opened with the normal prayer, they began to discuss the possibility of a new and better translation of the Bible from the original languages into Dutch” (Cf. Acta 1618/19:18; Kaajan s.a.:86ff.; De Kooter, 2018).

As with most decisions or records of church meetings, it should be noted that minutes

usually indicate a certain progression of events, or ‘prehistory,’ – sometimes brief, but often more extensive than generally presumed. The latter was the case with the famous Great Synod of Dort; the ideal of a Dutch Bible Translation had travelled a long road by this time.

This ‘prehistory’ was a troubled one in the Low Countries ever since the Synod of Emden in 1571 (cf. Goeters, 1971 and also Rutgers, 1899:90). For specific reasons, the Synod of Emden took place in Germany (Lomberg, 1973:7-35), but, as with this synod in 1571, the Acta of synods that occurred in the Netherlands subsequent to Emden (1574, 1578, 1581, 1586 – cf. Rutgers, 1899:160, 213; 267, 367, 426-427, 534, 608 et seq.) mention the need for – and the expressed desire and striving for – a “correct translation of the Bible in the Dutch language” (cf. Goeters, 1971:56; Rutgers, 1899:90).²

In this regard, Nauta relates how Helmichius presented his report at a Particular Synod of North Holland in Amsterdam in 1607 – an argument for the continued efforts to complete a new and thorough translation of the Bible in Dutch. Helmichius, says Nauta, “recalled how this issue (the matter of a Dutch translation of the Bible – VEd’A) had remained on the agenda since 1571, when it had been addressed by the delegates of Cologne during the Synod of Emden ...” (Nauta, 1937:2). He then quotes Helmichius himself: “...how many general synods and annual synods of Holland have dealt with this, holding diligent discussions and debates, as well as investigating various methods of translation, with the knowldege – the resolution, even – of the government of the provinces of the Low Lands ...” (Nauta, 1937:2-4).

To go even further back in this prehistory, we need to return, quite literally, to the beginning of the Reformation, and to the first Bible translations that arose as the fruit of the Reformation. Luther’s famous translation, which he began during his exile at Wartburg in 1521-1522, deserves particular mention (cf. Blanke, 2005:258-265). Within the same time-frame, Ulrich Zwingli’s reformation work in Zürich encouraged the fertile climate which produced the translation known as the Zürich Bible (cf. Beutel, 1998:1500; Campi, 2005:1947). It wasn’t long before a number of other translation initiatives saw the light, the most famous of which are the Tyndale (English) and the Olivétan (French – the later Geneva translation – cf. Neuser, 1989:87 et seq.).³

Similarly, there were a number of different Dutch translations in circulation in the Netherlands by the close of the 16th century. All this is concrete evidence that the Reformation doctrine of *sola scriptura* both presupposed and required (and resulted in) faithful translations of the Bible from the original languages.⁴

In terms of tracing the development of Bible translation as such, the prehistory goes much further back into the past.

2 “... de bibiorum correcta translatione Flandrica ...”, in Acta 1571 (cf. also Goeters, 1971:56).

3 The “Bible de Genève” was a French translation (the first French translation from the original languages), originally by Pierre Robert Olivétan, cousin of Calvin and disciple of Jacques Lefèvre d’Etaples (*Faber Stapulensis*). The latter produced the first French translation of the Bible in the 1520s – from the Latin, however. Olivétan’s translation (published in 1535) has been edited subsequently and became known as the “Bible de Genève” (i.e. the French Geneva Bible translation). It shouldn’t be confused with the “Geneva Bible” (English translation by William Whittingham, from 1557) or the “Genfer Bibel” (current modern German translation, the “Neue Genfer Übersetzung”). For a few hundred years the Bible de Genève was the most important French translation of the Bible.

4 It is remarkable that in the literature about the historical background to the *Statenvertaling* the Luther German Translation is almost always mentioned (cf. for example the impressive research by De Kooter, 2018:14 et seq.) and on occasion the French translation. Of course, there is also reference to the English King James translation that was discussed at the Synod of Dordrecht 1618/1619. Other translations of the Reformation, e.g. the Zurich Bible, shouldn’t be excluded but I never found such a reference in the literature.

2.2 A brief excursion – Bible translation in the Early Church

It is a matter of foundational importance to realise that the principle of translation, i.e. the aspect of the translatability of Scripture as the Word of God, arises from Scripture itself. Indeed, there are many instances in the New Testament in which the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, is used. The first parts of this Greek translation of the Old Testament, which was done at different times and periods, date back to the third century B.C. – more than a century after the completion of the canonical books of the Old Testament (cf. Dogniez, 1998:1487-1491). The principle of the authoritative translation of Scripture is thus embedded in the Word itself.

Regarding the Bible itself, there were already translations of the New Testament in the 2nd century, as well as of the entire Bible. Some of the earliest include the Syriac Aramaic translation (Peshitta – actually about six versions) and various Old Latin translations (the *Vetus Latina* or *Itala*). The Latin translations in particular rose fairly quickly to prominence as the knowledge and mastery of Greek dwindled in the Roman Empire. In addition, the growing authority of Rome as capital city meant the Latin translations were increasingly valued in the life of (especially) the Western church. Other well-known translations from the early centuries include the Coptic translation (2nd – 4th century), the Ethiopian translation (4th century), the Gothic translation of the 4th century (the famous Wulfila Bible), the Armenian translation (5th century), and the Georgian translation (5th century) (cf. Ebertshäuser, 2006:18-20).

The Roman Empire's official recognition of the Christian faith in 313 AD gave rise to the pursuit of a single Latin translation, which in turn led to Jerome's (Hieronimus') task in 382 of producing this translation – or at least co-ordinating existing translations such as the *Vetus Latina* into this Latin translation. His contribution was essential in establishing the principle that translation needs to take place from the original languages – in other words, from the Hebrew and Aramaic texts in the case of the Old Testament, rather than, as some would have had it, from the Greek translation (the Septuagint).

Jerome's (Hieronimus') translation and editing in the late 4th century AD resulted in a work which would be well received and widely recognised – from whence the name *Vulgata*, which implies a common and popular reception. This Latin translation has continued to play an important role in the church and in the world up to today.

This is an important fact, because almost 1200 years after Hieronimus' Latin translation, at the time of the Reformation, it would again precipitate the vital question of the availability of the Bible in the vernacular – against fierce and mighty opposition from Rome. This defining issue would play an important role at the Synod of Dort, and continues to do so today. The matter of the canonical books, and the inclusion and status of the apocryphal books, would also have important consequences at Dort, and up to our present day.

2.3 A thousand years later

After a leap of more than a thousand years, the issue of Bible translation would again be thrust onto centre stage in church history. It is remarkable that wherever the Spirit of God was bringing forth new life and the accompanying repentance and conversion, it went hand-in-hand with new initiatives in Bible translation. This was evident, for example, among the Hussites in Bohemia, the Waldensians in Italy and France, and the Lollards in England (Ebertshäuser, 2006:21). It could be said that all instances of genuine Reformation in dark times are accompanied by the rejection of false teaching and proclamation of true Biblical doctrine. An inevitable result of the appeal to Scripture as the only authoritative standard for true doctrine was that the urgent need for thorough and authoritative Bible translations that could be read and understood by ordinary Christians became increasingly apparent (Ebertshäuser, 2006:20) – and this was no different at the Synod of Dort.

The short overview above is important when considering this topic, because it brings us to a

highly significant pre-Reformation translation, namely the 14th century Wycliffe translation by John Wycliffe (1324 – 1384). This work (translated in part from the Latin Vulgate, and partially assembled from existing sections of the Bible already in English) was a forerunner of the Tyndale translation. This translation was undertaken by William Tyndale (ca. 1494–1536) as the first English translation from the original languages; he began in 1525 and completed it while on the run for his life. The Tyndale translation (along with the Geneva Bible – not to be confused with the Genevan translation of our time) was in turn a precursor of the later King James Bible, which itself grew out of the Reformation – the fruit of the Reformation in England, in other words. The topical relevance of the King James translation for the Synod of Dort becomes clear when it is noted that it was precisely the King James Bible that was put forward as an example and motivation for the principles of a new, authoritative Bible translation from the original languages at the seventh sitting of the synod on Tuesday 20 November 1618 – a matter which the synod would eventually decide in favour of (Acta 1618/19, s.a.:19 et seq.).

2.4 Bible translations from the time of the Reformation

A more in-depth discussion of Bible translations from the time of the Reformation is beyond the scope of this article, but it is important to realise that the *Statenvertaling* – as a notable outcome of the Synod of Dort – did not originate in a vacuum. It is contained within a considerably broader stream of Bible translations which emerged at a similar time during the Reformation (the Luther, Zürich, Olivétan and Tyndale translations), or which flowed directly out of the Reformation (such as the King James Bible and the Dutch *Statenvertaling*). A few examples will serve to illustrate this:

In German there were: Luther's German translation (with a substantial contribution by Melancthon). The New Testament appeared in 1522, and the complete Bible in 1534 – with the last revision by Luther himself appearing in 1545;⁵ the Zurich translation (Huldreich Zwingli and associates). Sections of this translation were available between 1524 and 1529, and in complete form in 1531 – a full three years before the Luther translation was published in its complete form; the Lübeck translation (1533/1534). This translation also appeared before that of Luther's, although it relied heavily on the latter. The Lübeck translation was in 'Nederduits' or a German version of "Plat" – a North German dialect, distinct from (the later development of) High German. This must not be confused with 'Nederlands' or Dutch, which was also known as 'Nederduits' at that time. This translation is also known as the Bugenhagen translation, due to the contribution by Bugenhagen, a colleague of Luther's.

In French there were the translation by Jacques Levèvre d'Étaples (Faber Stapulensis, 1455-1536), of which the New Testament was published in 1523 and the complete Bible in 1528. Then also Robert Olivétan's translation (1535). This translation by Calvin's cousin was later revised in various editions in Geneva, and proved popular with French reformed churches for more or less 300 years.

In Italy it is presumed that in the 13th century a translation was already in circulation among the Waldensians. Two Italian translations (from Latin) by Nicolo Malermi and Antonio Brucioli appeared in the 16th century, leading to severe persecution by the Roman Catholic Church. In 1607 an Italian translation, made from the original languages by the reformer Giovanni Diodati, was published in Geneva; this translation is still in use today (Ebersthäuser 2006:23).

There were similar Spanish and English translation initiatives (such as Tyndale's, from 1525), but the details of these are beyond the scope of this article (Ebersthäuser 2006:23).

What *is* of relevance to this topic is the fact that none of the translations that are still recognised and used today (Luther, King James etc.) were the first translations of the Bible

5 It is less well-known that there have been 18 printed German translations since the Middle Ages, before the Reformation (cf. Landgraf).

into that particular language. We could rather point out that it is the culmination of centuries' worth of translation work that found its highest expression in such translations.

Things were no different with the Statenvertaling. Worthy of special mention, however, are the principles of Bible translation, and the standards to which a translation should conform, that were established at the Synod of Dort. It is for precisely this reason that this topic should form part of any *Dort 400* commemoration.

3. The Statenvertaling – *monumentum aere perennius*⁶

Without delving too deeply into the historical details, we will now focus on the principles of Bible translation, as determined by the Synod of Dort in 1618/1619, and the ramifications of the decisions made at Dort regarding a Bible translation. We will also discuss the implications for us today.

Reference has already been made to the fact that a number of Dutch translations or partial translations were already in use at the start of the 17th century (cf. De Kooter, 2018:14 et seq.). Criticisms of various points of these translations had already been surfacing at that time. For the most part, these translations were not from the original languages, and consisted of versions of other translations in Dutch (Kaaajan, s.a.:86), or compilations of such editions or versions.

Nauta corroborates this fact: "It is probable that the Reformed in our land possessed one of these translations – possibly even more than one." He goes on to say: "The translation most commonly used was the one published in Emden in 1562, which rose to prominence under the name of the Deux Aes Bible." Van der Vlis is in agreement with Nauta: "Furthermore, it is not that true that there were no Dutch Bibles available around 1600. On the contrary – there were several translations in circulation! The most commonly used was the so-called 'Deux Aes Bible', published in Emden in 1562."⁷

But what exactly was the Deux Aes Bible? The *Nederlands Bijbel Genootschap* (Dutch Bible Society) describes the Deux Aes Bible as follows:

In 1562 a new translation of the Bible was published. This consisted of a translation of the New Testament from the Greek, published in 1559, together with a new revised edition of the Old Testament from the Liesvelt Bible, completed in 1561. The Bible became known as the Deux Aes Bible, named for a reference to Nehemia 3:5 ..." (cf. Van der Vlis).

Many copies of the Deux Aes Bible were in circulation. By the last decade of the 16th century criticism of the Deux Aes Bible had been voiced for a while, with the renowned and influential Marnix (Philips of Marnix of St Aldegonde, 1540-1598) being the most vociferous critic. As an example, his 1594 letter to the learned Hebraist, Johannes Drusius, furnished a number of reasons for his description of the Deux Aes Bible as being "so faulty that a totally new edition is required" (in Nauta, 1937:6). And 13 years before that (in 1581) Helmichius, in a passing remark to his friend, Arnoldus Cornelisz, said that a new translation of the Bible was "truly necessary" (Nauta, 1937:6).

At the Synod of South Holland in 1599, Wernerius Helmichius and Arnoldus Cornelisz were appointed to preside over the translation of the Bible into Dutch. The idea was to continue the translation that Marnix of St Aldegonde was working on until his death in 1598. Cornelisz himself died in 1605, leaving Helmichius to complete the task alone. Helmichius reported

6 I.e. a "... monument more lasting than bronze" (Horace).

7 Cf. G. van der Vlis, <https://www.statenvertaling.net/vdvlis1.html> Date of access: 25 July 2019.

on the progress of the work at the Particular Synod of North Holland in 1607, as noted by Nauta (1937:1 et seq.). There will be no further discussion of his report at this point, only to mention that it established the urgent need for a thorough and faithful translation into Dutch from the original languages. The matter dragged on, with the translation work taking place in a piecemeal fashion, until the Synod of Dort in 1618/1619 would finally tackle the project head-on. Nauta words his conclusion to this prehistory so aptly: “Only the great Synod of Dordrecht of 1618 brought an end to the prolonged period of failed attempts to provide a new Bible for the people” (Nauta, 1937:9).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the long and tiresome labour undertaken by so many diligent servants was not in vain. Nauta’s conclusion recognises this, and indicates that the Synod of Dort in 1618/1619 did not take place in a vacuum – in contrast with the tendency to pluck the “Great Synod” out its historical context, and to consider it anachronistically; the same applies to the issue of Bible translation: “This does not mean that all the hard work and effort of more than 45 years – at least since 1571 – has been fruitless. Quite the contrary. Apart from the fact that the synod ordered the translators to use Marnix and Helmichius’ notes, the churches at Dordrecht – when making decisions about translation – could gain from the experience acquired through the discussions and translation attempts over the years. And so, firm and general convictions could be established that would help answer several questions that come to the fore when dealing with a new Bible translation” (Nauta, 1937:9).

4. The Synod of Dort’s decisions concerning the translation

4.1 A prominent point on the agenda, and the King James translation

How heavily the need for a new, thorough Dutch translation from the original languages weighed on the minds and hearts of those at the Synod of Dort in 1618/1619 is apparent by fact that it was, in a manner of speaking, at the top of the agenda – the first order of business⁸ after the delegates’ letters of credential had been received, evaluated and accepted. The opening prayer of this sixth session of the synod – the first session at which the matter of the a new Dutch Bible translation was addressed – is considered even by Kaajan to be the official opening prayer of the synod: “The session in which the gravamen concerning the new Bible translation was dealt with as an item on the agenda [19 November] was opened by the president, pastor Bogerman, with such an exceptional prayer that it served as the official opening prayer, as it were, of the synod” (Kaajan, s.a.:86).

It also became apparent at this point that foreign delegates would play a valuable role in the proceedings. The English delegates, for example, gave a meticulous account of the translation of the King James Bible, which was finally published seven years before, in 1611, highlighting which principles of translation they had applied.

The theologians of Great Britain have explained, in writing too, the manner and means by which the mighty King James commissioned the perfect translation of the Bible into English; how the the work duties were allocated and discharged; and which rules were prescribed for the translators to follow – so that the Dutch churches could judge what would be of use for them too ...” (cf. Acta 1618/19, s.a.:18).

8 Kaajan (s.a.:86 e.v.) offers a lengthy and colourful description of the session on 19 November 1618: “Het eerste gravamen, dat door het moderamen bij monde van den Preses der Synode ter behandeling werd aangebode, was dat betreffende een nieuwe vertaling van de Bijbel. Verschillende particuliere Synoden hadden het ter Generale Synode gebracht. Door de behandeling van dit belangrijke gravamen, heeft de Synode alle kerken grootlijks aan zich verplicht en zich een schier onsterfelijke roem verworven. De zoo uitnemenden ‘Staten-Bijbel’ is niet zonder reden een ‘monumentum aere perennius’ (een monument duurzamer dan metaal) geheeten ...”

4.2 Principles of translation and rules/guidelines for the translators

Discussions regarding the purposes and principles of the new Dutch translation took place over eight sittings of the synod (Session 6 to 13), from Monday 19 November to Monday 26 November.

The most important decisions concerning the principles, rules and guidelines that were to govern the translation project can be summarised as follows:

It must be a “better” translation, “from the original languages directly into Dutch”. The need and urgency was great; as in previous synods it was determined “that this task should be carried out diligently, quickly, and competently, in the shortest time possible...” The synod decided that the translation needed to be *completely* new, not “merely editing the existing Dutch versions, but at the same time avoiding the annoyance of making jarring changes; taking from previous translations things that would not violate the truth, purity, and the character of the Dutch language...” (cf. Acta 1618/19, s.a.:19). Therefore, this translation had to be from the original languages, from the Greek and Hebrew texts. Nevertheless, the translation process still needed to consult and take into account the best existing translations, as well as the interpretations, explanations and decisions of various scholars (cf. Acta 1618/19, s.a.:20).

In conjunction with this, additional rules were set in place for the translators (Cf. Acta 1618/19, s.a.:20):

- Care has to be taken to follow the original texts as closely as possible, with the idiomatic expressions of the original language being retained as far as the Dutch language allowed. Hebrew or Greek expressions that are too difficult to retain in translation have to be carefully recorded in the marginal notes.
- In cases where it is necessary to add words to the text in order to facilitate a better grasp of the meaning, the addition needs to consist of as few words as possible. The addition is required to be in a different font, and in parentheses, in order to differentiate it from the original text.
- A short table of contents has to be included at the start of each book and chapter, and cross references to other parts of Scripture are to be inserted in the margins.
- Apart from an occasional note to briefly explain the reasons for choices made in the translation of difficult passages, the synod determined that it is neither necessary nor advisable to include comments on doctrinal aspects of the text.

There were also discussions on other aspects, which are briefly noted below.

4.3 Canonical and apocryphal books

A detailed and lengthy discussion concerning the apocryphal books was held at the ninth session of the synod, on Wednesday 21 November.⁹ It is important to remember that this discussion had in view only the apocryphal books of the Old Testament – in other words, the books that are, admittedly, included in the Septuagint, but that do not form part of the Hebrew Canon (the *Tenach*, which we know as the Old Testament – cf. the Belgic Confession, articles 4 & 6; the discussion at Dordrecht was about those mentioned in article 6). The books that originated after the time of the New Testament, known as the New Testament apocrypha, did not receive even a mention at Dordt.

9 Cf. Neuser (1989:83-103) for a thorough discussion of the reformed view on the apocryphal books of the Old Testament.

It was unanimously concluded that the Old Testament apocrypha are merely human writings, with some sections consisting of fictional stories as well as false teaching and scriptures. There were even instances in which the apocryphal books contradicted the canonical books. The question was whether it was appropriate to include the apocryphal books in one volume with the holy, inspired and canonical books of the Bible (cf. Acta 1618/19, s.a.:20).

This deliberation was put forward and voted on at the tenth session, on Thursday 22 November 1618. With the support of the majority it was decided to translate the apocryphal books from Greek into Dutch, but with less diligence and care than with the translation of the canonical books (cf. Acta 1618/19, s.a.:20,21).¹⁰ In what seems to have been an extremely intensive discussion, the synod felt that it would be desirable if the apocryphal books were not published in the same volume as the Holy Scriptures. Nevertheless, the apocryphal books had long been published in Protestant Bible translations in the same volume as the canonical books, both inside and outside the Netherlands (cf. Neuser, 1989:83 et seq.). Examples in this regard were the Luther, Zurich, Castellio and the French Genève [Olivétan] as well as the King James translations).¹¹ Therefore the Synod judged that it “could cause mild annoyance and even slander” if this was no longer the case and the apocryphal books were now published separately from the (canonical) Scriptures (Acta 1618/19, s.a.:21).

This decision was made with many reservations and qualifications. The apocryphal books had to be separated “... from the canonical books by a substantial space between the two, [they should be distinguished] by a distinctive title page ... in which it needs to be explicitly indicated that these books are human and therefore apocryphal (Acta 1618/19, s.a.:21).”

Furthermore, the apocryphal books needed to be printed “in a smaller font, distinct from the fonts used in the canonical books, so that notes could be made in the margins at the places where the truth of the canonical books is contradicted, especially where the Roman apologists found material to argue against the truth from the canonical books.” (Acta 1618/19, s.a.:21.)

The printers had to ensure that the apocryphal books were:

... bound on their own, with page numbers that differed from the canonical books, so that it would be immediately evident that they were not canonical ... (Acta 1618/19, s.a.:21.)

The printers therefore had to number the pages of the apocryphal books differently and independently from those in the canonical books of Scripture (Acta 1618/19, s.a.:21).

An interesting departure from existing editions of the Bible was the synod’s decision to place the apocryphal books after the books of the New Testament, to emphasise the distinction between the them and the canonical books of the Bible (Acta 1618/19, s.a.:21).¹² Up until this point, it had been customary to place the apocryphal books directly after the Old Testament. This practice is still followed in some editions of the modern Luther Bible, for example.

10 This was during the tenth session of the synod, on 22 November 1618 (Acta 1618/19, s.a.:20, 21.) How important and decisive this decision was is shown by the fact that Neuser quotes it (1989:99-100).

11 Neuser (1989:83 et seq.) gives a concise and clear explanation of this fact. He also mentions that after the Westminster Confession of 1647 the Apocrypha were no longer included in reformed Bible translations.

12 The delegates from abroad didn’t vote on this decision (Acta 1618/19, s.a.:21).

4.4 Grammatical and lexicographical aspects

There were two issues especially that needed to be clarified before the translation work began; these were on the agenda for the 12th session on Saturday 24 November 1618 (cf. Van Vlis).¹³ There were other matters for consideration as well, e.g. the Names of God, the chapters and verses division etc. (cf. Acta 1618/19, s.a.:23), but the details can not be discussed here.

4.4.1 “Du”, “Gij” or “Jij”?

An issue of great importance was the question of how the the Lord should be referred to in the second person in the translation. Formerly, the second person singular “du” was used in Dutch, where currently “jij” or “je” is used to refer to someone in the second person. Where the second person plural in Dutch used to be “gij” or “jij”, it is now “jullie”. Both “jij” and “gij” were thus plural forms. In due course, however, “jij” or “gij” replaced “du” as the singular form. To avoid ambiguity, the plural form “liede” or “lui” (meaning people), was added to “jij”, and over a period of time the plural form “jullie” (“jij” plus “lui”) came into use.

It is against this background that the discussion that unfolded at the 12th sitting of the Synod of Dort (cf. Acta 1618/19, s.a.:22), needs to be understood. This sitting, which took place on Saturday 24 November 1618, was the occasion of an intensive and contentious debate on this issue.¹⁴ Eventually, with majority support, the decision was made that the Dutch translation would use the plural form “Gij” to refer to (speak to) God in the second person (Acta 1618/19, s.a.:22). The decision would guide and shape the Dutch Biblical language for centuries to follow. While this discussion may look to some like pedantic hairsplitting, it demonstrates how the synod took great care and expended effort to ensure that the translation would honour the Lord in the manner in which He would be referred to and addressed in the second person.

4.4.2 The rendering of JHWH

Another important issue on the table at Dort that day was the question of how to translate יהוה (JHWH) into Dutch. This matter was also addressed at the 12th sitting, on Saturday 24 November 1618. The decision, which pertained to the Statenvertaling, would go on to be groundbreaking for the generations (and other translations) to follow, continuing to have an impact centuries later (Acta 1618/19, s.a.:22,23).

13 <https://www.statenvertaling.net/vdvlis5.html> Date of access: 25 July 2019.

14 Cf. the report of Van der Vlis, “dat het de Synodale Gedeputeerden seer druk hadden met saek en van weinig belang, raekende de woordkens du en gij, en overleij [= overlegde], of men, Godt aensprekende, soude seggen du, of gij. Eenigen meinden, dat men gij seide in 't veelvoudig getal, en dat men 't ontrent Godt, die een is, niet moght gebruiken. Anderen beweerden in 't tegendeel, dat du in onse tael niet meer in gebruik was, en den Nederlanderen nu seer raeu, en hardt in d' ooren sou klinken. Ook seiden se, dat gij niet gebruikt wierdt in 't veelvoudig, maer in 't enkel getal, en dat men van veelen sprekende, daer bij voegde het woordeken lieden, gij lieden. De geenen die op 't woord du drongen, wilden ook, dat men seggen soude du bist. D' anderen seiden, dat bist soo wel in onbruik was geraekt, als du, en dat men seggen moest, gij sijt. Ook seiden eenigen, dat gij beide in 't enkel en in 't veelvoudig getal wierdt gebruikt. De Professor Polyander verstont [= was van mening], dat men gij sou behouden. Sibrandus Lubbertus, die 's daeghs te vooren uit Vrieslandt was aengekomen, wilde, dat men du sou seggen. Gomarus drong op gij, en seide, dat men 't in 't enkel en in 't veelvoudig getal kon gebruiken. Thysius en Walaeus waeren voor 't woordeken gij; gelijk ook de Geldersche, Hollandsche, Zeeuwsche en Uitrechtsche Theologanten, doch een van de Hollanders wilde du. De Vriesen beweerden, dat men du moest seggen. Maer de Preses Bogerman hieldt het met gij. Veele toehoorders waeren verwondert over dese woordstrijdt, en lagten onder malkanderen, omdat men met sulck een deftigheit [= ernst] en eerbiedigheit redeneerde van 't du en gij. De Remonstranten schrijven, dat het op weinig stemmen aenquam, of men sou alle de Nederlandtsche Predikanten hebben bevolen hunne moedertaele, gelijk die toen in gebruik was, te veranderen en hun het du en 't bist opgedrongen. Doch het gij dreef noch met meerderheit van stemmen boven.” <https://www.statenvertaling.net/vdvlis5.html> Date of access: 25 July 2019.

The two options being considered were either to render the consonants JHWH (יהוה) as Jehovah (the consonants with the vocalisation for Elohim) or with the appellation “Heere” (meaning “Lord” in the Dutch of that time). The latter followed the example of the Septuagint, which rendered JHWH as Κύριος (Lord).

The synod settled on the second variant, but specified the use of capital letters, namely, LORD (HEERE). This was then approved (Acta 1618/19, s.a.:22,23).

4.5 Completion of the translation

It was estimated at first that the translation work would take four years. This was completely unrealistic; the work only began seven years after the synod, in 1626. Due to a number of setbacks (including translators falling ill, and even dying, a translator who needed to be ransomed from Spanish imprisonment, and an outbreak of the plague), the translation and revision were only completed by 1635. The final product was handed to the States General in 1637. The “acceptance and introduction” was not without opposition either. But that is another story ...¹⁵

And thus the illustrious Statenvertaling is a pivotal outcome of the Synod of Dort 1618/1619 – indeed a “monumentum aere perennius” (as mentioned by Kaajan, s.a.:86). It is a substantial confirmation of the recognition and authority of Scripture as the Word of God. This translation is in use up to our present day. A complete revision in modern Dutch was published in 2010,¹⁶ with further editions and corrections having appeared since then. This Revised State Translation has been well received since then and is used in various churches in the Netherlands.

5. The significance of Dort in the question of Bible translation principles

It would be a big mistake to think the Dort Synod was only concerned with election and predestination and other related themes. The first mistake with this kind of thinking is that one tries to separate the questions that were discussed and answered at the Synod of Dort 1618/19 from the rest of the confession and faith. A second mistake is that one separates the whole issue that was dealt with eventually by formulating and accepting the Canons of Dort from the rest of the agenda of Dort. This is but one reason why the matter of Bible translation, that actually enjoyed the very first attention at the Synod, is so important and may not be neglected in any study of the Canons. The theological and confessional ratio for this is obvious. When you speak about the Bible and about the translation of the Bible, it pretty quickly becomes clear what kind of view of Scripture you have. This was also the case on November 19, 1618 ...

It is quite clear from the text of the Canons of Dort which view of Scripture was overwhelmingly accepted by the fathers at Dordrecht. However, my plea with this contribution is to demonstrate which view of Scripture was the implicitly accepted conviction of – at least – the outspoken part of the synod, as far as we can trace it in the documents. The treatment of the issue and importance of Bible translation and the inherent aspects of the various principles and rules for Bible translation indicate this most clearly.

The most remarkable thing about the principles of Bible translation, as already laid out in 1618, is that they are still valid today. This makes sense theologically, since the principles of

15 Cf. De Kooter (2018) for a comprehensive list of literature regarding the most important research on the completion and introduction of the Statenvertaling.

16 Bijbel, Herziene Statenvertaling. 2010. Dordrecht: Stichting Herziene Statenvertaling (HSV).

translation cannot be considered apart from the Doctrine of Scripture. The reformed Doctrine of Scripture, as made evident at the Synod of Dort in 1618/1619 when the commitment to the reformed confession was expressed, is most concretely displayed in how we “rightly handle the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15); this is especially evident in the principles of Bible translation. To mention but one foundational premise, and surely its most important facet: The Synod of Dort accepted that Scripture is the Word of God (cf. d’Assonville, 1998). Herein lies the power of the Canons of Dort: they do no more, nor less, than render the teachings of Jesus Christ – about the Doctrine of Election, and much more besides.

Research has already indicated that the principles of translation established by the Synod of Dort in 1618/1619 remained valid for many subsequent Bible translations. They include (cf. d’Assonville, 2004):

- “The translation must accord as closely as possible with the original source text;
- “the typical Hebrew and Greek idiom must be taken into account as far as possible;
- “the language of translation must be pure;
- “the Hebrew name Jahwe must be rendered in capitals or at least differentiated from the translation of Adonai.”

6. Conclusion

Much water has flowed into the sea since the Synod of Dort in 1618/1619 – and much philosophical water too. There has been a prodigious development in the areas of translation theory and the philosophy of language, specifically during the 20th century and past few decades. This is not the place to enter into a debate on the merits and demerits of these developments.

Those who participated in the Synod of Dort could obviously not foresee the later developments in language and philosophy of language, and the shifts in perspectives on language and communication. Disciplines and terms such as “structuralism”, “discourse analysis”, “post-structuralism”, “deconstructuralism”, and “semiotics” etc. would only come into being three centuries later. The 20th century’s most illustrious thinkers about language played no role at all – how could the later influence of Bertrand Russell, Ferdinand de Saussure, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jürgen Habermas and others have been anticipated? The fact is that 400 years ago foundational decisions regarding translation work were made without any foreknowledge of things that would follow in the disciplines of philosophy and the philosophy of language.

But does that mean that the principles of translation established at Dort 1618/1619 are outdated, and of no more value to us today?

What Dort teaches us regarding principles of translation is that there is an inherent and direct relationship between the view of Scripture, confession and the translation of Scripture. The confirmation of the Belgic Confession,¹⁷ i.a., as a confession of the churches at the same Synod that agreed on the Canons of Dort cannot be considered separately from the decision process that resulted in the principles for Bible translation.

17 Article 3, considered alongside articles 4-7 of the Belgic Confession, comes especially to mind: We confess that this Word of God was not sent, nor delivered by the will of man, but that holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost, as the apostle Peter says. And that afterwards God, from a special care, which he has for us and our salvation, commanded his servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit his revealed word to writing; and he himself wrote with his own finger, the two tables of the law. Therefore we call such writings holy and divine Scriptures.

The principles of Bible translation, as determined at Dordrecht in November 1618, were based on the assumption that translation is about faithful rendering of that which the Lord says in his Word. When measured against the Belgic Confession (as well as the Heidelberg Catechism), these principles of translation receive a value and significance that reaches beyond Dort and its historical meaning, all the way to the Statenvertaling, casting it in a new light. By this light we see that it is not only the Statenvertaling that is a “monumentum aere perennius” (a monument more durable than bronze), but the principles of translation, fixed in place at the Synod of Dort 1618/1619, are also “monumenta aere perenniora”.

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