

The New Inclusive Bible Translation in the Context of (Post)Modern Germany

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“Secularization that does not destroy takes place in the mode of translation,” Jürgen Habermas asserted in his often-quoted speech when he received the peace award of the German book traders in October 2001.[1] His statement indicates the frame into which I want to set my presentation of the Bible in inclusive German, *Die Bibel in gerechter Sprache (BigS)*. Many observers maintain that the return of religion characterizes the contemporary era,[2] which seems especially true in Western secularized societies. This return of religion is not particularly welcomed and often looked at with suspicion. Certainly, the events of September 11, 2001, also created this new awareness, which has raised questions about the relationship of the monotheistic religions to violence and power. In his speech,[3] Habermas warns of identifying Islam with violence because, as he reminds us, fundamentalism that is ready to use violence exists in every religion. He also mentions the painful decline of traditional life in the countries where the assailants of 9/11 come from, which in his view results from “an accelerated and radically uprooted process of modernization.”[4]

Habermas suggests that the “West as the global force of secularization” is able “to learn from its own history.”[5] We can learn that we have to develop a new relationship between secularity and religious traditions. It is true that we cannot fall back behind secularization and its critique of religious traditions according to the guidelines of reason. But secular society, so Habermas, would need to protect the idea that religious languages are powerful because they “contain important resources to bring about meaningful life.”[6] We have to understand Habermas’s quoted statement in this context: “Secularization that does not destroy takes place in the mode of translation.” The potential for meaning in religious traditions on whose norms and values secular societies live has to be translated into these societies. Habermas envisions that such translation would be “a deconstruction of religious truths that secularizes and along with it saves them.” He considers it necessary that such tradition finds appropriate and suitable, even “saving expression.”[7] By the way, he does not mean to leave this task only to theologians, but considers it a genuine philosophical task.

Viewed in this context, the new inclusive German translation is highly relevant to the debate on religion and modernity, (and its conceptual developments into “postmodernity” or “second modernity”). Although Habermas when talking about “religious truths” thinks more generally of religious doctrines or formulations in the Christian Credo, according to Christian theology such doctrines and beliefs are rooted in the Bible. The examples mentioned in his speech, such as the *imago dei* and the resurrection, are central biblical topics. Thus, Bible translators benefit from this debate about the relationship between religion and modernity. Here I would like to explain how the first German inclusive Bible translation came into being and how it connects to modern society.

Rooted within Modernity: *Die Bibel in gerechter Sprache*

This new German inclusive translation of the Bible would not exist without the annual gatherings of the Protestant Church Day (*Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag*) and its Bible study programs. Already at the end of the 1980s scholars who led Bible study events for the *Evangelische Kirchentag* created and tested inclusive translations of selected Bible texts. It was there that several Bible scholars conceived of the idea for a new Bible translation. In 2001, the editorial team came together, and slowly a total of fifty-two translators joined. In fall 2006, only five years later, the new translation was published, and it is now available for purchase to the public.

The *Deutsche Evangelische Kirchentag* is the biggest grassroots event of Protestant Christians in Germany; it has attracted many young people and the secularized public every two years since 1949. Its institutional structure and identity are an inherently modern phenomenon. The website of the *Kirchentag* explains that it originated in post-war Germany as a “movement of the Protestant laity” that “cherished its independence from the institutional Protestant Church [in Germany] and its Christian faith, which combines piety with socio-political responsibilities.” During the past decade, the *Kirchentag*

has regularly attracted about one hundred thousand participants, and it is a major event of public discourse and opinion within the Protestant Church in Germany.[8]

The new German inclusive Bible translation is connected to the larger public in two additional ways. First, it was important to the editorial team and the translators that translations be tested on the grassroots level during the translation process. Protestant and Catholic congregations were invited to read and to evaluate individual sections of the translation, to proofread them, and to give feedback to the translators. Second, the translation could not have been published without the financial support of private donors, all of whom appear in the Bible's appendix. Although the regional Protestant church, *Evangelische Kirche von Hessen und Nassau*, contributed to the project by giving release time to Rev. Hanne Köhler, who impeccably coordinated the entire work, the many necessary meetings of the editorial team and translators and the affordable price of the book would not have been possible without major fundraising efforts.

Since this German inclusive Bible translation grew out of the *Kirchentag*, it is indeed a Protestant project. Yet it is not limited to the Protestant canon, but includes the Apocrypha that belong to the Catholic canon of the Old Testament. Moreover, of the fifty-two translators, nine are Catholic Bible scholars. This kind of ecumenical cooperation was perhaps theoretically, but not practically, possible fifty years ago in Germany.[9]

What then is meant by inclusive or literally "just" (*gerechte*) language? In the preface to the translation the editors insist: "The name *Bibel in gerechter Sprache* does not claim that this translation is just and others unjust. Our translation confronts directly a foundational topic in the Bible, namely justice. This topic is central to this Bible translation in multiple ways." More specifically, the new inclusive Bible translation is sensitive to three forms of justice: gender justice, the Jewish-Christian dialog, and social justice that relates to the circumstances of biblical times, which are often romanticized in other German language translations.

It is obvious that attention to these three forms of justice relates to the history of Western Europe since the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. All three shaped modern Europe. At the end of the eighteenth century, Jews received civil rights that made them equals among equals. They were no longer required to plead for special laws for which the Jewish community was usually forced to pay, at great expense. Jewish emancipation in eighteenth century Europe and Germany was also supported by a Bible translation; Moses Mendelssohn translated the Torah into German. Yet, as the Jewish history of the nineteenth century illustrates, in Europe the newly won civil rights were fragile and the success of modern, racist anti-Semitism destroyed them completely.

The nineteenth century is also the century that introduced the notion of women's liberation. Women fought for their right to education; this was implemented fully only during the twentieth century. The demand of women to receive all civil rights carried over into biblical research, especially in the United States—as exemplified by *The Woman's Bible*, the first Bible commentary exclusively written by women and published at the end of the nineteenth century in New York by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, one of the most prominent activists for women's suffrage.

The dismantlement of feudal society that enabled such new beginnings in Europe also led to new forms of social antagonism based on classism, which became another sign of modern societies. During the class struggles of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries the Bible again played an important role. Let me only mention Karl Marx and Leonhard Ragaz.

The newly published inclusive German Bible translation (BigS) and its hermeneutics stand in the tradition of these social and theological developments, particularly as articulated since the 1960s with an emphasis on the dialectics of the Enlightenment. After all, enlightenment does not only stand for endless human progress, but, as we have seen in recent history, it also includes irrationality and even loss of humanity. Enlightenment can lead to new petrification or exclusions, which the new discourse on theology after Auschwitz, liberation theology, and feminist theologies engage as new signs of our time. The new inclusive Bible translation bears clearly the stamp of those three theological movements. The inclusive translation engages the modern era—not in a naïve or uncritical fashion, but based on a view of "modernity that has become critical of itself."

Adam as *Mann*, *Mensch*, *Menschenmann* and *Menschenwesen*: The Example of Gen 1-3

The creation myths of Christianity and Judaism and to a certain extent also of Islam go back to a common source, the Hebrew Bible, and there especially to Gen 1-3. In the three monotheistic religions, the biblical stories have been used to justify the hierarchical relationship between man and woman. This dynamic is particularly evident not only in the legal systems of the three religions but also in the secular laws that emerged from them. The legal system and Holy Scriptures were read to reinforce each other, withholding from women basic civil rights in modern society. As a consequence, alternative biblical interpretations emerged that related to the gender debate in the respective religions. In the past two decades German-speaking feminist interpreters developed many gender-oriented readings of the two creation narratives that constructed new textual meanings. They contributed to the development of feminist theology, rereadings of the Bible within Christianity, new ideas about deconstruction, masculinity studies and queer theory, and new feminist approaches to Judaism and Islam.[10]

The new German inclusive Bible translation is clearly inspired by these developments. Frank Crüsemann, who translated the Gen 1-36, confronts the problem. His translation takes seriously that the Hebrew noun *adam* can refer both to generic humanity and to the male besides the first woman. In Gen 1:27, the human, *ha-adam*, is created according to God's image and exists in two forms, as male and female. *Adam* is obviously a name for the species that includes both genders. Then Gen 2:7ff reports that God creates the earthling from the earth, *ha-adamah* (Gen 2:7). From this first creature God creates another creature by putting the original creature into a deep sleep and taking away a part of the creature, its rib or the whole side (Gen 2:21-22). Later, both, *ha-adam* and his wife are named (cf Gen 2,25). One could translate this verse in different ways. One possibility is that "both, the human (*Mensch*) and his wife were naked." This translation is not able to blur the fact that the creature called *Mensch* or *adam* stands next to another creature, the woman, and that therefore the noun *adam*, "*Mensch*," signifies only the male human in contrast to Gen 1, where the term included both male and female.

Feminist Bible scholars recognized early that the shift of meaning of the Hebrew word *adam* into human (*Mensch*) and then into male (*Mann*) is not only a problem in the history of interpretation but that the biblical text itself is a stumbling block for just gender relations. The Bible seems to teach that the man (*Mann*) is closer to humanity (*Menschsein*) than the woman. The problem does not disappear when historical critics distinguish between the first creation story in Gen 1 and the second creation account in Gen 2-3 and then propose reading Gen 1 as a correction of Gen 2-3. This historical explanation only shifts the problem, but cannot make it disappear.

So how does the translator of Gen 1-36 in the German inclusive translation, Frank Crüsemann, solve the problem? He translates Gen 1:27 in this way: "Da schuf Gott Adam, die Menschen, als göttliches Bild" (Literally: "Then God created Adam, humans, in the divine image"). Crüsemann uses the Hebrew word *adam* twice in this verse, but translates it once as a proper name ("Adam") and then with an ordinary noun "Menschen" (humans). Thus, he relies on the technique of "double" translation as known already by the Septuagint. He also makes use of a grammatical shift between singular and plural. He starts with the familiar proper name "Adam" (a singular) and distances it by juxtaposing it with a plural noun ("Menschen") – an unusual construction in the German language. This process allows him to indicate that the Hebrew singular *adam* carries a plural meaning.

Crüsemann applies the same strategy—the translation of a Hebrew word in two different ways—in Gen 2:7, which he translates this way: "Then Adonai, that is God, formed Adam, the human creature (*Menschenwesen*), from the earth of the field and blew the breath of life into his nose. And the human (*Mensch*) became breathing life" (Gen 2:7). I want to mention only briefly that Crüsemann translates the double Hebrew designation of God *YHWH Elohim* in the way of an apposition: "Adonai, das ist Gott." [11] As to his translation of *adam*: Next to the proper name Adam stands the German word "Menschenwesen" (human creature) and the noun "Mensch" (human) in the next sentence. In other words, in the verses mentioned Crüsemann relies on three different translations of the one Hebrew noun *adam*: humans (*Menschen*), human creature (*Menschenwesen*), and human (*Mensch*).

In the course of Gen 2-3, Crüsemann translates the noun *adam* in still different ways. For instance, in Gen 3:9, God speaks to the "male human" (*männlichen Menschen*) after he and his wife were hiding in the Garden; in Gen 3:12, the "man-human" (*Mann-Mensch*) speaks to God; in 3:17, the "man as

human" (*Mann als Mensch*) is the addressee. In all of the references in which the Hebrew text uses the word *adam* next to the woman, Crüsemann tries to make visible the double connotation of man (*Mann*) and human (*Mensch*). Of specific interest is his translation of Gen. 2:22-23: "Da formte Adonai, also Gott, die Seite . . . zu einer Frau um und brachte sie zu Adam, dem Rest des Menschenwesens. Da sagte der Mensch als Mann: Dieses Mal ist es Knochen von meinen Knochen und Fleisch von meinem Fleisch! Die soll Ischscha, Frau, genannt werden, denn vom Isch, vom Mann, wurde die genommen!" Crüsemann follows the well known interpretation by Phyllis Trible: the woman is taken out of adam and when adam looks at her he recognizes himself as man. To be precise, one has to say: when "the rest of adam" looks at the woman he recognizes himself as man/male. This is what Crüsemann wants to make clear in his translation.

His translation illustrates that he does not aim for a monolithic translation of the word *adam* as if it were the same every time the word appears. He also does not translate *adam* as earthling, although this would nicely make visible the Hebrew pun between *adam* and *adamah*. Rather, Crüsemann wants to avoid the narrow-minded equation of "Mensch=Mann" (human equals man) and to liberate the term *adam* with a variety of translations. In fact, he believes that the Hebrew noun *adam* is "an extreme example of inclusive language" because it embraces both men and women as humans and even goes beyond this idea by referring to different specifications of the male (*Mann*), depending on the context in which the noun is translated.[12] Crüsemann's translation makes the complex meaning of *adam* apparent.

Yet this translation also creates a fluid meaning of the word *adam* and shows its instability. The result is that the meaning of *adam* as an apparently stable description for the male gender is destabilized. Every time the noun *adam* appears in the biblical text, translator and readers have to renegotiate the meaning of the text and the translation. They have to reconsider who adam "is." The seemingly innocuous method of translating multiple meanings for one word, then, contributes creatively to the gender debate of our time and takes advantage of postmodern hermeneutics that question the stability of identity and its assumptions. One could almost say, with Judith Butler, that Crüsemann's translation creates gender trouble not only for the creation story but also among its readers.

The BigS and Secularization: Concluding Comments

For Jürgen Habermas a Christian frame to understand the semantic potential of the Bible has broken away. He talks about "translation" in his Frankfurt speech, but he really means the transformation of religious contents into language that secular society can understand. He also explains that the boundaries between secular and religious reasoning are fluid. Both sides have therefore to contribute to negotiating these boundaries, and both sides have to take seriously the other side.[13] The translators and editors of the German inclusive Bible translation responded to this insight and demonstrated in many different ways that biblical content has to be newly articulated within the context of modernity. The new translation provides the opportunity to create conversations with both the secular and the religious proponents in society. The German inclusive translation introduces issues prevalent in modern society, such as the gender and marriage debates, to the churches that lean towards traditional positions and find it easy to exclude new ideas and lifestyles.

Yet the new translation also offers an opportunity to the larger public to participate in conversations that play an important role in the churches. For instance, the debate about the Jewish heritage of Christianity is particularly important in Germany as well as elsewhere. Finally, the inclusive translation helps clarifying religious ideas that a straightforward deconstruction of religious truth might miss because religious truths are already abstract articulations of religious experience lived in concrete historical contexts. The new inclusive German Bible translation should be appreciated as an important contribution to issues central for the future of our society because it gives renewed attention to those religious traditions that are founded on the Bible.

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Notes

[1] Jürgen Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2001).

[2] See, e.g., the contributions in the anthology to the conference with Jürgen Habermas: Rudolf Langthaler and Herts Nagl-Docekal (eds.), *Glauben und Wissen: Ein Symposium mit Jürgen*

Habermas (Wien: Oldenbourg, 2007). Almost all essays in this collection begin with this introductory comment.

[3] For the following quotes by Habermas, see Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen*.

[4] Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen*, 10.

[5] This sentence does not appear in the printed version of the speech but it is part of the delivered speech that is available online at www.glasnost.de/docs01/011014habermas.html.

[6] Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen*, 22.

[7] Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen*, 23 and 29.

[8] The meeting took place in the following cities since 1999: in Stuttgart 1999; Frankfurt 2001; Berlin 2003 which was the first ecumenical (Catholic and Protestant) Kirchentag and 191,000 participants attended, doubling the usual number of participants; Hannover 2005; Köln 2007.

[9] To demonstrate the significance of the inclusive German Bible translation, I want to mention that in 2006 another German Bible translation was published, the Neue Zürcher Bibel, that was commissioned by the *Synode der Evangelisch-Reformierten Landeskirche des Kantons Zürich*. This church authorized translation received considerable personnel, technical, and financial support. Currently, an official Catholic translation is in preparation, more specifically a revision of the *Einheitsübersetzung*. It would be interesting to examine how both translations relate to modernity and how they integrate and exclude denominational identities.

[10] For primary sources on Gen 1-3, see Kristen Kwam *et al.* (eds.), *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1999). For Christian and Jewish interpretations that are important in German-speaking countries, see Marie-Theres Wacker, "Der Fall Eva(s): Christlich-feministische Theologie und die Paradiesgeschichte," in *Feminismus-Islam-Nation: Frauenbewegungen im Maghreb, in Zentralasien und in der Türkei* (ed. Claudia Schöning-Kalender *et al.*; Frankfurt: Campus Verlag 1997), 241-48; eadem, „Wann ist der Mann ein Mann? Oder: Geschlechterdisput vom Paradiese her,“ in *Mannsbilder: Kritische Männerforschung und Theologische Frauenforschung im Gespräch*, ed. Wacker and Stefanie Rieger-Goertz (Berlin: Lit 2006), 93-114.

[11] Every translator of the *Bibel in gerechter Sprache (BigS)* agreed not to write out the tetragrammaton in respect of the Jewish custom to not use the name of God. Moreover, they agreed not to use the traditional German translation of the tetragrammaton that is "Herr", as the title "Herr" refers to every man and is a male dominated term. It also connotes "Herr-schaft" (Lord-ship, ruler-ship) so that the translation of the name of God with "Herr" would reinforce the image of God as a ruling man and as a male ruler. Translators of the *BigS* found different translations for the tetragrammaton. Crüsemann decided to use the Jewish prayer terminology *adonai*, and the noun *elohim* further explains the tetragrammaton, as he mentions in a footnote to his translation of Gen 2:22.

[12] See Crüsemann's comment on Gen 2:22 in his Genesis translation.

[13] Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen*, 22.

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