

Translating the Psalms in 16th Century Europe

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Many of the people gathered here have reason to be grateful to Klaus Mayer. My particular reason is that he was the first academic to suggest that I might be more than just a frivolous if talented actress and, in working for my PhD under his supervision, I learned the true discipline of work. The best piece of advice he gave me was to insist on my writing a chapter of my thesis in the first six months. "You won't use it" he told me, "but it will stop you from endlessly reading and not writing." Indeed.

Translating the Bible in 16th century Europe was difficult, dangerous and politically divisive. I want to give you a brief overview of the situation, concentrating on the Reformation in Germany, France, Switzerland and England, before looking at the translations in your handout, which deal specifically with the Psalms. The Catholic Church relied for the most part on the Vulgate Bible. By the 16th century it was considered by scholars to have become corrupt. Enthusiastic humanists such as Erasmus raised the cry of *ad fontes*, demanding translations from the original source, in the case of the Old Testament, from the Hebrew.

To start with the difficulties, the Hebrew language itself is problematic. It was usually written without vowels and, although the Hebrew text itself did not vary, the interpretations of that text did vary enormously. Furthermore, the people who actually were familiar with the Hebrew, the Jews, were no longer around, at least officially. They had been expelled from England in 1290, France in 1394 and Spain in 1492. There were, however, Christian converts who helped with the interpretation of the Hebrew, and also there were still Jews in the Holy Roman Empire, and they proved useful to Luther.

The Christian Hebraists went to enormous lengths to learn Hebrew.¹ The Protestants really took up the learning of Hebrew, to the extent that even children were writing Hebrew grammars!² Giving the faithful a translation of the Bible which they could understand was one of the few ideas on which the Reformers agreed, as the great humanist scholar Erasmus put it, with his famous wish that the ploughman

¹ Although there was no Jewish community in England or France, the Hebrew language had been kept alive because it was considered to be the language of God. Martin Bucer thought that in the end everyone in the world would be speaking Hebrew.

² W.Kemp, D.Desrosiers-Bonin, "Marie d'Ennetières et la petite grammaire hébraïque de sa fille d'après la dedicace de 'l'Epistre' à Marguerite de Navarre (1539)", BHR, 60, 1998, pp.117-134.

on his plough, the weaver at his loom and even women should be able to sing the Psalms in their own language. Luther established textual studies during the 1520s at the University of Wittenberg.

Philip Melancton was his professor of Greek. Scholarly Jews were assembled as Hebrew advisers (Luther called them his Sanhedrin!) In Zurich, Leo Jud used a group discussion called a *Prophetzai* in order to check the translation of the Hebrew scriptures into German.

The difficulties in actually translating from the Hebrew were compounded by the fact that the Bible was seen as the word of God and this led to charges of heresy and blasphemy by the Church and the Inquisition, punishable by the stake. As the Psalms were considered to be the work of King David, they were not quite so dangerous from a dogmatic point of view, but they held different dangers, as we shall see.

Translating the Bible into the vernacular was dangerous because it was prohibited by the Catholic Church and such institutions as the Faculty of Theology at the Sorbonne. They were afraid that the power would pass from the Church to the people, once the people could understand the texts for themselves. In fact, the power was also seen to pass from the Pope to the monarch, as was the case in England.

In England, the position was both dangerous and politically divisive because of the activities of Henry VIII. Translations of the Bible were widely seen as seditious, because they undermined the authority and power of the Catholic Church. Before Henry's separation from Rome, translations of the Bible into English were prohibited. The great translator William Tyndale had to flee to the continent to continue his work. The awful tragedy is that he was burnt at the stake the year before Henry, having broken from the Pope, encouraged the publication of Miles Coverdale's Great Bible, which was mostly derived from Tyndale's work. The Great Bible, finally published in 1539, had a frontispiece depicting Henry VIII handing out copies of the Bible in English to his bishops. Many of the translations of the Bible into English were dedicated to Henry VIII, and their prefaces were specifically anti-papal.

Part of the reason for Tyndale's flight to the continent was the way that his translation of the Bible was read by critics such as the Catholic Sir Thomas More.

Richard Duerden³ has suggested that "More is a very apt reader of ideological implications. Those three words, elder (rather than priest), congregation (rather than church), and love (rather than charity), do advance the interests of the Protestants. More does not see Tyndale's New Testament as a rendering of a single book, the Bible, from one language to another; he believes Tyndale has produced a different book."

Thus the translations into the vernacular became a dangerous political weapon. Many would die, including poor Etienne Dolet, a humanist scholar and publisher and some time friend and publisher of Marot, who was hanged and burned at the stake in 1546.⁴

Biblical translation divided the Catholic Church and the Reformation leaders. But the interests of the Protestants themselves were not the same throughout Europe. There was Martin Luther in Wittenberg, Huldrych Zwingli and Leo Jud in Zurich, Martin Bucer in Strasbourg, which was a free city in the Holy Roman Empire and not part of France, and of course Jean Calvin in Geneva.⁵ All had differing ideas on Church reform.

The people's Bible came about because of Gutenberg's printing press. The cheap editions in the vernacular came later. When everyone who could read could have access to the text, it meant that they could also provide their own interpretation, and this would lead to further divisions. According to McCulloch,⁶ 390 editions of various of Luther's writings were published in Germany in 1523 alone, and beyond his own writings, around three million copies of related pamphlets, mostly illustrated, were printed in German by 1525.

Out of the vast field of biblical translation in the sixteenth century, I want to discuss metrical Psalm translation, with special reference to the Psalm translations of Clement Marot, whom we know and love. His metrical Psalms were set to music and sung both privately in people's homes and also communally in Church. At first they were sung to the melodies of his popular secular songs. They were taken up easily by the common people, and this meant that they were also perceived as a dangerous tool by the established church.

³ R.Duerden, Equivalence or power? Authority and Reformation Biblical Translation, in *The Bible as Book, The Reformation*, ed. O.O'Sullivan, The British Library and Oak Knoll Press, 2000, p.12

⁴ Duerden (*ibid*) p.9 'charged with blasphemy and sedition, primarily because he had wrongly translated a single sentence concerning the immortality of the soul in a dialogue attributed to Plato. His sentence read *Après la mort tu ne seras plus rien du tout* - the last three words had no direct source in the dialogue'

⁵ It was the French Protestants who took up the singing of the Marot and de Bèze Psalter, with their familiar tunes. and that is because Calvin was wise enough to withdraw his own translation of the Psalms in favour of Marot's.

⁶ D.MacCulloch, *Reformation (Europe's House Divided 1490-1700)*, London, Penguin Books, 2003, p.152.

Marot's work was published between 1539 and 1562 (the Geneva Psalter). It is therefore convenient to look both backward and forward from these dates. Marot only translated 50 (in fact 49) Psalms, and his work was completed by Théodore de Bèze, Calvin's second in command in Geneva. Marot's work was preceded by many translations into German (Luther translated the New Testament already in 1522 and the Old and New Testaments in 1534) and there was an almost contemporary translation in England by Henry VIII's court poet, Thomas Sternhold (1547?). Strangely enough, Sternhold also died after translating roughly 50 of the Psalms, which were completed by John Hopkins and others. Later in the century, Sir Philip Sidney would die after translating just 50 of the Psalms and his work was completed by his sister. There was obviously a curse on those with the temerity to translate the Psalms.

At the time of writing his Psalm translation, Marot was probably the most popular poet in France. In fact the Psalms have attracted poets over the centuries, for many of whom the Psalms were the only part of the Bible that they were inspired to tackle. However, their importance for the Protestant cause in the 16th century cannot be exaggerated.

When Luther rose to prominence in 1519, there was already a group of ecclesiasts in Meaux (just outside Paris and famous for mustard) who were working for Church reform under the aegis of Guillaume Briçonnet, the Bishop of Meaux. One of the reasons that this group aroused the suspicions of the Catholic Church and the Sorbonne was that it included Lefèvre d'Étaples. He was a renowned scholar and author of the *Quincuplex* (1509), a reworking in Latin of the Psalm translations done by St. Jerome in the 4th century CE.

Briçonnet numbered among his correspondents Marguerite de Navarre, the sister of the King Francis 1st. It is believed that she was the person who encouraged Marot to undertake the translation of the Psalms into French poetry for her and her entourage to read. Marguerite was Marot's protector throughout his life; indeed she protected as best she could all the French evangelicals, including Calvin. When the King finally turned against the Protestants after the *Affaire des Placards* in 1534, Marot fled to Marguerite in Nerac, before the situation became so dangerous that he had to leave France. His house was raided and we believe that some of his early work on the Psalms was burnt at this point.

When Francis 1st was captured after the Battle of Pavia in 1525, the Sorbonne attempted to arrest the group at Meaux, some of whom fled to Strasbourg at the time a free city, where Martin Bucer headed a group of Reformation scholars who

were working on the original Hebrew text of the Old Testament. Later Calvin would also seek sanctuary in Strasbourg, where hearing the Psalms sung in German gave him the idea for an equivalent in French. Enter Clement Marot *et al.*

Turning to the handout, you will see King David from one of the beautiful windows at Chartres Cathedral. In the 16th century, he is considered to be the author of the Book of Psalms. There is still the debate as to whether to translate according to the spirit or the letter--Luther, Zwingli and Bucer all wanted inspired freedom for the translator to translate according to the sense rather than literally, word for word. However, the Psalms for the scholars of the Reformation and indeed all the Christian exegetes, were Christocentric--they were seen as messianic. This is another aspect of the power shift from the Pope to the monarch. The Kings Francis 1st and Henry VIII also identified themselves with King David, and are represented in this guise, especially playing the harp.

The Psalms were a valuable tool for the evangelicals because of their message of the coming of Christ. The popularity enjoyed by the Psalms amongst the common people is because everyone could identify with them. The hopes and fears, joy and misery expressed in the Psalms are a reflection of how we all feel at certain times. The French Protestants were recognised through their singing of the Psalms, whether to old popular tunes or the new liturgical music. Luther tended to rely more on hymn singing and liked to keep to the old, well-known tunes.

Psalm 1

Page 3. This is the Hebrew text of Psalm 1, verses 1 and 2, with vowels and punctuation added by the Masoretes in the ninth century CE.⁷ Its structure is concise and this has given translators a great deal of licence. However, the irregularity of the verses would prove a problem for the metrical Psalm translators, and soon showed up those of little talent.

The Psalm opens with the word '*ashrei*' which means literally 'happiness'. The happiness of the man who has not walked in the company of the wicked. '*Reshaim*' in line 2 is a common term for the ungodly, the opposite of '*zaddik*' the righteous.

Psalm 1, King James 1611

I have used the King James version, because it is the text with which I am familiar, and this goes for many generations of English speakers. There is always the problem of whether to keep to the old, accustomed text even though it is sometimes

⁷ I read the Hebrew verses aloud so that the audience could hear the rhythm of the Psalm in its original version.

inaccurate, because it is familiar to the faithful. The Reformers must have experienced the same problem *vis-à-vis* the Vulgate.

The psalm is set out in well-balanced parallel verses. Verses 1 and 3 are both triple parallels, with the thought continuing from line to line to build up a cumulative effect. This is known as synthetic parallelism.⁸ Verses 2 and 4 are shorter, each with a parallel image plus an extra detail, as in verse 2 which concerns the Psalmist's delight in the law on which he meditates day and night. Similarly, in verse 4, the chaff, which the wind driveth away. Verse 5 is a synonymous parallel, both parts reflecting each other perfectly, whereas verse 6 consists of an antithetic parallel with contrasting thoughts between the fate of the righteous and the ungodly.

If we examine the content of the Psalm, we see that there is a progression towards evil in verse 1, namely from walking to standing and then sitting. Note also the translation of '*layzim*' as 'scornful'; the Vulgate has 'pestilent'. In verse 3 there are examples of images of nature, tree, water, fruit and leaf. The image of water is frequently used – to the rabbis, rivers of water often referred to the study of the Torah – also corn, wine, olives and oil. The image in verse 4 of the wicked likened to chaff blown away by the wind is also typical. The influence of Coverdale can be seen in the psalm, especially in the two final verses.

I want to show you a few other interpretations by the medieval rabbis. These commentators, Rashi (Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, 1040-1105) and Radak (Rabbi David Kimchi 1160-1235) were used by the Christian Hebraists as aids to difficulties in vocabulary, and their comments are often included in the notes at the side of their translations. The metrical Psalm translators did not have this luxury. There was of course a problem for the Christian Hebraists, in that they wanted to use the skills of the medieval rabbis in order to understand the Hebrew text, but they were not always keen on the Jewish interpretation. The idea was '*hébraïser sans judaïser.*' Indeed it could sometimes be dangerous to rely too closely on the rabbinical version; you could be accused of judaïsing.

Here are two examples of commentaries from the medieval rabbis. Firstly Rashi who lived in Troyes, Northern France, with reference to Psalm 1, line 1. 'The praises of a man les felicements(?) in Old French. The praises of a man, and these are the praises of a man: that he did not follow, because since he did not follow, he did not stand, and since he did not stand, he did not sit.'⁹

⁸ For a brief explanation of parallelism, see *The Psalms* (with Hebrew text and English translation), commentary by Rev. Dr. A. Cohen, London, Soncino Press, 1965, pp. xiii and xiv.

⁹ *Mikraoth Gedoloth, Psalms*, vol. 1, Translation of text, Rashi and other commentators by Rabbi A. J. Rosenberg, New York, The Judaica press, 2000, p. 3.

Radak, who was widely used by Martin Bucer, remarks that “The hallmark of wickedness (*resha*) is haste and restlessness. Therefore, scripture uses the word ‘*halach*’, went, or followed, in conjunction with the wicked. The wicked advise people to follow their ways. They extol the advantages of amassing wealth and of continual rejoicing, and, very often, people are misled in this direction. This lifestyle pleases them because it offers temporal pleasure, but they fail to foresee the harmful results it will bear in the future.’ He continues with reference to the scorners: “These are cunning people who use their cunning for evil, who find fault with others and divulge their secrets. They are usually idlers, who sit on the street corners and gossip; hence the expression “nor sit in the company of scorners.” Thus, we mention three positions in which a person can distance himself from evil company and evil deeds. The position of lying down is omitted because one usually does neither good nor evil when recumbent.’¹⁰

Page 9 of the handout lists some of the foremost scholars and translators of the time who were invaluable to Marot and to the Reformation cause. Pierre Robert Olivetan was Calvin's cousin and he was a Christian Hebraist. Martin Bucer actually starts his 1529 Psalm translation, which he wrote under the supposedly Catholic and French *nom de plume* of Aretius Felinus, with a dedication to Francis 1st himself! In the explanation to Psalm 1, v. 1, he writes ‘*Foelicia illi viro....*’ which seems to be from Rashi. There is also an interesting marginal note: ‘*alii improbi, alii cum eis ambulat, stant, sedent.*’ Bucer also mentions Kimchi in his notes.

Jan van Campen's (Campensis) original paraphrases were in Latin, published in 1532. I make the point in my book that the *Paraphrases* in both Latin and French, were small books which Marot could have easily carried around with him, as opposed to the works of Olivetan and Lefèvre which were huge and would probably have been chained. The Bucer translation and commentary was also portable.

With Lefèvre, you can see the difference between the Hebrew and the Gallic and Roman versions of St. Jerome, written in the fourth century BCE. I would like to point out a nice compromise on the part of George Joye, who did a translation of Bucer's Psalms in 1530. "*Blessed is ye man which walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly: and standeth not in the way of siners / and sitteth not in the seate of ye pestilent scorners.*"

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp.3-4.

André Chouraqui was a translator of not only the Old Testament but also the New Testament and the Koran. His interpretation of *ashrei*, the opening word of Psalm 1, differs from happy or blessed.

Page 4. Luther

Luther was lecturing on the Psalms already in 1513 and 1514. He translated the Psalms into German in 1524. Luther's Psalter was also altered by the nineteenth century. Although it is not a metrical translation, Luther's beautiful translation has rhythm and drama. It opens with '*Wol dem*'¹¹ which is the opposite of '*wel dem?*' woe to him, so 'Happy is he who...' Although Luther has lost the 'stand' from verse 1, it does appear in verse 5: '*Darumb werden die gotlosen im gericht nicht stehen bleiben.*' His verse 4 is particularly fine, with its alliteration:

*Aber so wirdts den gotlosen nicht geben
Sondern wie dye spren, die der wind verstrewet.*

The ending is also dramatic, following on from the alliteration of all the g sounds in verse 5:

*V.6: Denn der Herr kennet den weg der gerechten,
Aber der gotlosen weg wirdt umbkommen.*

My metrical German example of this translation was to have been from Leo Jud, but annoyingly he did not translate this particular Psalm into German verse form.¹²

Page 5. Ludwig Oeler

Failing Jud, I found a work by Ludwig Oeler in the *Strasburger Gesangbuch* of 1525. I discovered the identity of this hitherto relatively¹³ unknown translator with the help of Chris Michaelides.¹⁴ Oeler's story is another example of the changes in fortune which could arise as a result of the Reformation.

Oeler was a Carthusian monk who was living round about 1520 in Freiburg in Breisgau. However he had to flee the city in 1522 because he had preached against one of the Barefoot monks. He ended up in Strasburg, where he became a citizen

¹¹ I have not updated the German except in V.3 line 5 where I added the h to 'ihm.'

¹² (He did, however, translate into German Erasmus' Latin translation and commentary on Psalm 1. which he published in Basel in 1520. Erasmus' translation has 'in the seat of the pestilent.' Nevertheless, his commentary makes an interesting distinction. He has that 'in the seat of the scornful' (spotvogelen) is from St.Jerome and refers to the people who mock those who wish to serve God and the crucified Christ, such as the Jews. Whereas he feels that 'in the seat of the pestilent' is from St.Augustin, who refers to those in high places whose power is misplaced. For what can do more harm (plag und sucht) to the belief in Christ than that those who should be preaching and teaching -the priests- are unlearned There follows a diatribe against bishops and those in authority, using such expressions as pestilence and poison!)

¹³ Brought to my attention by R.Gerald Hobbs, Emeritus Professor of Church History at the University of Vancouver, Canada. (See bibliography)

¹⁴ Curator in the Italian and Modern Greek section of the British Library.

and thus protected from further threats of litigation. He also opted to join the Reformation and undertook the translation into German of Psalms 1 to 8. In 1525, he also wrote a satire on the Pope's Jubilee in 192 rhymed verses! In 1530 he became a canon at the Thomasstift in Strasburg, after which he seems to be heard of no more.

Notice that he added a doxology to all 8 of his Psalm translations. 'Glory be to the father and to the son and to the holy ghost' etc. The Strasburgian Reform - certainly in the early days - was still 'catholic' in rites, just like Luther. The doxology at the end of every Psalm (or group of Psalms) is traditional and has remained so in the Lutheran tradition. The translation itself follows Luther's translation very closely. Luther had translated the Psalms already in 1524, so they would have been circulating freely by the time Oeler was writing. This is not great poetry, but it was part of the early *Strasburger Kirchengesang* which so impressed Calvin. The opening 'Wol dem' echoes Luther and later in his verse 1 he picks up the 'Weg' from Luther and repeats it, whilst ignoring the 'radl' in Luther's first line. In his second verse, he repeats the 'redl' of Luther, which is a further indication of his reliance on the great Reformer, as both have chosen to ignore the meditate (*hegev*) of the Hebrew original.

We can see that Oeler has combined the six uneven verses of the original psalm into three verses of his own, which are divided up as four and three lines each. In this way he manages to balance the various parallels in the original text. He is no great poet, in particular his ending, also taken from Luther, is less effective than his master's. On the other hand, he has produced a version which rhymes and was presumably easy to sing.

Page 6. Clément Marot

If we now turn to Clément Marot, we can see how a true poet has tackled this dramatic Psalm. He has used four verses of French to include the first two verses of the original in his verse 1, then the original verse 3 in his verse 2; verses 4 and 5 of the original in his verse 3 and verse 6 of the original in his verse 4. Marot was the first poet to give each Psalm an individual verse form and also one of the first to respect the parallelism of the Hebrew. This is quite extraordinary, since the rules on the various forms of parallelism were not written down until the nineteenth century.¹⁵

Notice how his opening three lines, all starting with 'qui' build up to the climax of line 6. He has included all the good qualities in the man before emphasizing how

¹⁵ By R.Lowth in 1835.

happy this will make him. Marot also keeps the past tense in his first line and the sequence of events, (*trac* is a way, or path). Marot's verse 3 is not only poetic but also well-balanced in lines 11 and 12.

Line 13, *Pas les pervers...* contains effective alliteration, which contrasts with the flow of the two following lines:

Ainçois seront semblables aux festus

Et à la pouldre au gré du vent chassée.

The 'foelicité' of his verse 6 echoes Rashi.

The variants from the Geneva Psalter of 1562 do not improve on Marot's original work, in particular substituting 'mais' for 'pas' in his line 13 destroys the alliteration.

Page 7. Thomas Sternhold

Thomas Sternhold did his Psalms for Edward VI and not for liturgical purposes. He has taken some vocabulary from Coverdale's Great Bible 1539. Note that Sternhold is however following the Vulgate with the reference to pestilent, but he has moved it up a line and therefore also lost the concept of walking, standing and sitting. The variant has altered this, which is fair enough, but the other alterations are not good and one in particular is quite out of rhythm. Joye, Whittingham *et al.* were Marian exiles in Geneva and they altered Sternhold's text in the 1562 Psalter, supposedly to bring it closer to the original text. This was not always the case and they spoilt his poetry, as you can see. Marot's versions were also changed in the 1562 Geneva Psalter. This means that posterity often judged these poets, and especially Sternhold, harshly, for poetry which was altered from their original work.

Sternhold wrote in fourteeners (8 feet followed by 6 feet) and some of his vocabulary was old-fashioned even at the time he wrote it, such as 'eke' in verse 6, which means also. In fact parts of Sternhold's Psalm are good, in particular the two opening lines, and also his verses 2 and 3, taken from Coverdale. The alteration to verse 3 in John Day's *Whole Book of Psalms* 1562 is appalling and shows why critics such as Pope and Dryden poured scorn on poor Sternhold.¹⁶

Page 8. Sir Philip Sidney

Sir Philip Sidney's translation which was not used for liturgical purposes, but it is extremely poetic and reminiscent of his contemporary, Shakespeare. Notice especially the adjectives: straying steps, wicked council, bad mates,¹⁷ idle scorners, marking mind, etc. There is also some effective repetition, such as 'blessed' in line 1 and 'blessings' in line 13, and also line 19: 'For God doth know, and knowing doth

¹⁶ This will be explained by Elisabeth Jones in her forthcoming edition of Sternhold's Psalter. (See bibliography)

¹⁷ Mates are companions with whom one shares meat.

approve' and line 21:'But they that sinne in sinfull breast do cherish.' There is some elaboration, as in lines 15 /16:

For neither shall the men in sinne delighted
Consist¹⁸ when they to highest doom are sighted.

Sidney and his sister, Lady Mary Pembroke, who completed his Psalm translation, were strongly influenced by Marot in using a different verse form for each individual psalm. Note that in this psalm, Sidney ends with a verse of four lines. I read the two final verses aloud because they sound wonderful.¹⁹

If you turn to page 10, you will see Psalm 23, which is the best known of all the Psalms, although that was not the case in the sixteenth century. From it we get the idea of Christ as the Good Shepherd. Opposite you can see Marot's translation of Psalm 23, part of the final 19 Psalms that he composed in Geneva. I want to make two points, one about parallelism and one about interpretation.

You can see that Marot has invented the first line and rhymed it with line 2, which is the official opening line. However, if you did not have the King James version in front of you, I am sure you would never have noticed. That is Marot's brilliance.

An example of the problems with interpretation is shown by the famous 'yea, tho' I walk through the valley of the shadow of death....' The *gei--zalmavet* can be interpreted variously as 'Yea, tho' I walk through the valley; of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil,' as Marot has it, or the more usual 'yea, tho' I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil.' A more modern translation might say 'the deathly dark valley'. You can see that there is a problem here with changing the words which have become so known and loved. This was equally a problem in the sixteenth century with regard to the Vulgate.

I read Marot's translation of Psalm 23 at Klaus' funeral and I ended by reading it again in his memory.

¹⁸ Consist means stand together, remain or rest.

¹⁹Rivka Zim gives further information on this translation. (See bibliography)