

Bible translation is no longer a risky business

The Murderous History of Bible Translations

BY HARRY FREEDMAN, *BLOOMSBURY*, £20

Harry Freedman's new book is tremendous fun. It will probably be best enjoyed by readers with Greek, Latin and a strong knowledge of history. But even the most erudite reader might feel frustrated at what has been lost to the world. For instance, the *Hexapla*, a parallel literary analysis of six early translations of the Old Testament, written by the controversial theologian Origen and destroyed in 638.

Freedman's book is full of great real-life characters too, like the Scottish twin adventurers Agnes Smith Lewis and Margaret Dunlop Gibson, who found the Hebrew original of part of the Book of Ecclesiasticus while travelling to the Middle East in 1896. Or St Jerome, the biblical translator from the late 300s who, when not translating the New Testament, warned wealthy, attractive young women to avoid "long-haired, bearded men". This, Freedman dryly notes, "made him unpopular in Rome, particularly with long-haired, bearded men".

The "murderous history" of the title is a trifle oversold, and it's clear that Freedman is aware of this. It's undoubtedly true that many lives were lost due to biblical translation over the years, but the more gruesome deaths are mainly connected with William Tyndale and his associates. Tyndale, as readers will know, was inspired to produce an English translation of the Bible by Martin Luther's German translation. As Freedman explains, it wasn't just Tyndale who was persecuted for this, but anyone connected to him, including a group of young Oxford scholars killed by the stench of salt fish stored in the dungeon into which they were thrown. Tyndale himself ended up being tied to a stake. His executioner had been instructed to strangle him before he was burned alive but this failed and he was left to suffer the flames, a process which in medieval times could take up to three days.

Once he gets past Tyndale, Freedman struggles to find any more cases appropriate to his title and focuses instead on controversies. But if the "murderous" angle was needed either to get a publishing deal or to bring this book to wider audiences, it seems like an acceptable sleight-of-hand.

Moving into the era of the Geneva and

King James Bibles, the focus is less on violence and more on the idiosyncrasies of various translations and versions. Freedman seems to relish drawing out the potential humour of the so-called "Wicked Bible", a 1631 edition of the King James in which a misprint led to the seventh commandment becoming "thou shalt commit adultery".

But far more interesting are the stories of the determined men and women who have devoted large portions of their lives to translating the Bible. As in the earlier sections, it's the singularity of these people that compels, and it really brings home the true richness of biblical history.

It seems strange to suggest that a book on Bible translations would provide rich fodder for celluloid adaptation, but it's easy to imagine a movie about Charles Thomson, whose father packed him and his five siblings on to a boat bound for America. His father died and the ship's captain stole their money, dumping the children in a port. Charles was taken in as a blacksmith's boy but ran away to discover a woman sympathetic to his desire to become a biblical scholar, and who raised him alone.

Or consider Julia Smith, who spent the 19th century fighting off crooked tax collectors and published her translation of

the Bible to prove herself equal to men.

What really unites these people is not violence, but the power of their faith, and their belief in the value of the Word.

Matt Thorne



A page from the 1526 edition of William Tyndale's Bible