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Romans 8:12

Translated in the light of textual, exegetical and translational pluralities

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Introduction

This paper aims at providing a translation of Romans 8:12 which is suited for a certain skopos and does so by taking into account textual, exegetical and translational pluralities. Since the skopos of this translation is an audience which is familiar with the mainstream Dutch translations, considerable space has been devoted to position our translation over against the other Dutch translations. This results in a new translation which is both recognizable by those who are familiar with other translations (aided by the footnotes) and yet independent in its own choices.

Textual Pluralities

The text of Nestle-Aland, 27th edition is used. According to the textcritical apparatus, there are no textual pluralities. Thus, the text of Romans 8:12 can be established as follows:

Ἔρα οὖν, ἀδελφοί, ὀφειλέται ἐσμὲν οὐ τῇ σαρκὶ τοῦ κατὰ σάρκα ζῆν,

Exegetical Pluralities

Ἔρα οὖν could function as a “compelling conclusion” following what just had been argued. This option is favored by Dunn.¹ Another possibility is to consider it as having a “resumptive function, introducing a new justification for the claim in 8:31-39 following a long justification (vv. 2-11) for the claim in 8:1.”² This latter solution however, seems artificial. Most translations seem to favor the first option and regard it as a strong conclusion of the preceding.

ὀφειλέται: According to the “Semantical and Structural Analysis of Romans” the image used of debtors is a dead metaphor, although the writer does not support this claim.³ However, in the formulation used by Dunn it seems like the metaphor is still active. He writes: “they are all debtors to God, to Christ, to the Spirit and should live accordingly (as honorable persons in debt would spend all their life’s energies to clearing that debt)”⁴ Moreover, since the word only occurs seven times in the corpus of the New Testament, it seems not likely that the metaphor is completely dead and gone. It would be preferable for the translation to retain the metaphor.

τοῦ ζῆν: The question is whether this infinitive is to be considered as consecutive with the sense: “debtors to the flesh with the result that we live by it”. The other option is exegetical: “debtors of the flesh, so as to live by it”.⁵ The latter option is favored by Murray and seems a reasonable choice.

Translational Pluralities

Ἔρα οὖν, This double connective has an important structural function in establishing the connection with the preceding. Therefore, it seems not wise to omit it altogether, as NBV has chosen to. The Dutch language has a whole range of words indicating a connective consequence, ranging from formal (“derhalve”, “bijgevolg”) to neutral (daarom, zo dan) to informal (dus). A choice from the neutral range is compatible with the register of the Greek and will not sound artificial to the readers.

¹ James D.G. Dunn, *Romans*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word Books, 1988), 447.

² Ellis W. Deibler. *A Semantical and Structural Analysis of Romans* (Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1998).

³ Deibler. *A Semantical and Structural Analysis of Romans*.

⁴ Dunn, *Romans*, 457.

⁵ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans; the English text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1975), 493.

ἀδελφοί: The traditional translation is ‘broeders’. But this word could also be used for “brothers and sisters” or “fellow Christians” as here. Lidell & Scott gives as translation for ἀδελφοί ‘brothers and sisters’ and cites as evidence the Elektra, line 536 by Euripides.⁶ Since enough evidence has been mounted⁷ to make ‘broeders en zusters’ at least a legitimate exegetical option, the use of the inclusive terminology should be favored on theological grounds. Paul includes himself in the statement and implications he draws in this verse (ἐσμὲν) and this does not only pertain to the male recipients of his letter, but also to the female. Due to the inclusivistic outlook of this verse, it is wise to include females here explicitly.

σαρκὶ and σάρκα

The problem how to render σάρξ is a notoriously difficult and complex one. The traditional Dutch translation is ‘vlees’⁸. The problem here is that in contemporary language it denotes nothing else but just plain meat. The only exception is the use of expressions such as ‘de geest is wel gewillig maar het vlees is zwak’⁹. Unfortunately enough there is no other word that can cover the same semantic range as σάρξ. Most recent Dutch Bible translations chose to render σάρξ not with one single term, but with different words, depending on context. The danger of this solution is overinterpreting and imposing foreign associations upon the text. The important feature of intertextuality is also lost because it is not possible any more to single out the one Greek word that underlies the translation. Despite the severe disadvantages of the latter option, in my opinion this will still prove to be the most fruitful solution. A translation who actually communicates a message is more desirable than a translation which fails to do so.

Having established the need for using more than one term to describe σάρξ, the discussion moves to the question which terms are most appropriate in this context. Considering formal grammatical structure is helpful here. In the “Dictionary of Paul and his Letters” this is described as follows: “When Paul uses *kata sarka* (“according to the flesh”) + VERB the semantic field is that of moral negativity. ... Every occurrence of *sarx* as morally negative lacks the article. This is probably due to the stereotyped prepositional phrases Paul employs.”¹⁰ These two observations are true for our verse. Moreover, these occurrences of σάρξ fall into the category of “rebellious human nature”. The translation should reflect these notions.

Skopos

My Skopos will be a ‘literal’, annotated Dutch translation. This type of translation is useful for those who are interested in Bible study and exegesis, but who are lacking knowledge of Greek. Those readers frequently use different translations next to each other, but are left in bewilderment about the different choices translations make. They usually lack awareness regarding skopos, but are aware of different possibilities of the ‘source text’. However, pluralities with regard to textual variants are easily overlooked. An example of this type of translation is the English NET-Bible. This translation is made by a team of evangelical scholars who annotated their translation with 60.000 notes.¹¹

⁶ H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford : Clarendon, 1968), 20.

⁷ Not just here, but in general scholarship.

⁸ English: ‘flesh’.

⁹ English: The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.

¹⁰ R.J. Erickson, “Flesh,” In *Dictionary of Paul and his letters*, edited by Gerald F. Martin and Ralph Philip (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 305.

¹¹ More information concerning the NETBible can be found on <http://www.bible.org/netbible/index.htm>.

Comparison of Dutch translations

Since the intended readers of our translation are familiar with the mainstream Dutch translations, it is desirable to discuss our translation in the light of those others. To analyse other options means to be able to discover some fallacies we should avoid. It also can point to some strengths which are to be kept and it can also discover issues which should be footnoted because of the expectations of the readers. The most well used Dutch translations are Statenvertaling (both Jongbloed and revised), NBG-51, Willibrord 1995, Groot Nieuws 1996, NBV 2004, and Het Boek 2008.

Statenvertaling (1637) and *Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap* (1951)

NBG-51 and Statenvertaling (Jongbloed) are remarkably similar and will be treated here as one. SVV reads: “Zo dan, broeders, wij zijn schuldenaars niet aan het vlees, om naar het vlees te leven.”¹² NBG: “Derhalve, broeders, zijn wij schuldenaars, maar niet van het vlees, om naar het vlees te leven.”¹³

Unfortunately enough, this rendering is prone to misunderstanding. The clause “om naar het vlees te leven” could be taken both to belong to “schuldenaars” or to “aan het vlees”. If it is taken to belong to “schuldenaars”, the meaning of the sentence is completely opposite to the intended meaning. In fact, it means that we are obliged to live according to the flesh! Therefore it is important that the translation is syntactically as clear as possible in order to avoid wrong inferences.

Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling (2004)

“Broeders en zusters, we hoeven ons niet langer te laten leiden door onze eigen wil.”¹⁴

This rendering has its weaknesses, because *Ἀρα οὖν* is not explicited and ‘hoeven’¹⁵ has a casual connotation in Dutch: it denotes an action that might be desirable but has no strict obligation.

Willibrord (1995)

“We hebben dus verplichtingen, broeders en zusters, maar niet tegenover het zondige ik om naar de wil daarvan te leven.”¹⁶

This translation is wonderfully crafted together, and is both natural Dutch and faithful to the Greek. Only the word order is switched around, which I don’t think is necessary.

Het Boek (2008)¹⁷

“Dus, broeders en zusters, zijn wij aan onze eigen zin niets meer verplicht. Wij hoeven er niet meer aan toe te geven.”¹⁸

The use of “zin” sounds artificial here. It is possible to be obliged (verplicht zijn aan) to quite a number of realia, but I doubt if it is possible in Dutch to be obliged to your “zin”. Moreover, the sentence is split in two. This can be desirable when Paul uses long and complex sentences, but this sentence is not overly long or difficult, so for our skopos it is better to retain the original structure of the sentence.

¹² English: “So thus brothers, we are debtors not to the flesh, to live to the flesh.”

¹³ English: “Hence brothers, we are debtors, but not of the flesh, to live to the flesh.”

¹⁴ English: “Brothers and sisters, we don’t need to be led by our own will.”

¹⁵ English: “need to”.

¹⁶ English: “We have thus obligations, brothers and sisters, but not over against the sinful I to live according to the will of it.”

¹⁷ Revised Edition (2008). The text of the 1998 edition is the same except that it does not translate inclusivistic and renders just ‘brothers’.

¹⁸ English: “So, brothers and sisters, we are not in anything obliged to our own taste. We don’t have to give in to it.”

Translation¹⁹

Daarom, broeders en zusters^o, zijn wij niet verplicht tegenover onze zondige natuur^oom volgens die natuur^o te leven.²⁰

^o Grieks: “broeders”, maar dit woord kan ook gebruikt worden voor “broeders en zusters” of medechristenen.

^o Traditioneel vertaald met “vlees.” Hier bedoelt Paulus echter de zondige menselijke natuur.

Short explanation of translation

I chose to render the first occurrence of ‘sarx’ with ‘sinful nature’, this is in line with the conclusions drawn in the preceding paragraph. To avoid redundancy and too much markness, chosen is not too repeat ‘sinful’ but refer to it by the demonstrative ‘that’. The expression ‘verplicht tegenover’ connotes the obligatory nature of the clause. This very formulation is used in juridical contexts, which fit with the notion of ‘debtors’ in the original.

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¹⁹ The footnotes provided with this translation are indeed part of the translation, as is indicated in the discussion of the skopos.

It should be kept in mind that this translation includes just one verse and is in this sense artificial. In a full blown translation with this skopos it is more likely that the translation of ‘adelphoi’ is explained fully in 1:13 where it first occurs in Romans.

²⁰ English: Therefore, brothers and sisters, are we not obliged against our sinful nature to live according to that nature.