

The Gospel according to Borges

The spiny authorial roles of Bible interpreters and translators

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Borges's "Gospel According to Mark," written 1,900 years after the first biblical Gospel by the same name, provides a compelling illustration of how translators always play a visible, creative role in the work they perform (even when they do not realize it or want this role). The characters' interaction with the Bible is an ideal platform to explore some complex notions that stem from postmodern conceptions of translation, such as the complicated relationship established between translators, their translations and audience. Furthermore, it is worth noting that Mark had a considerable impact on two of the three other Gospel authors, and that the Bible has had immeasurable impact on the general interpretation and translation of texts around the world. Borges's story may seem to portray an absurd misreading of the Mark, but I propose that this radical misreading is not altogether different from the millions of interactions with the texts that have been responsible for creating and disseminating the Bible. Through brief histories of both Mark and the Vulgate in tandem with Borges's text, we can understand that millions of nameless translators, interpreters and scribes have been responsible for actually creating what is now, in a fragmented nature, the Bible.

Keywords: Borges, the Bible, "The Gospel according to Mark", postmodern translation theory

"The original language of Christianity is translation."

Lamin Sanneh

Introduction

Around 70 CE the first text was written that later became one of the four Gospels of the New Testament, although it is placed as the second of the four. We no longer have *one* original text but, rather, many ancient handwritten copies of the lost

original and, mostly likely, copies of other copies, manuscripts that differ from one another to varying degrees. The early manuscripts contain no title, beginning directly with the first verse of what has now become, in various English translations, The Gospel According to Saint Mark (King James Version), The Gospel According to Mark (Revised Standard Version; Jerusalem Bible), or simply Mark (New International Version; Living Bible). The first verse reads, according to various translations: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (King James); “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God” (New International Version); or “Here begins the wonderful story of Jesus the Messiah” (Living Bible). The Greek word “εὐαγγέλιον” (*euaggeliou*) in this first verse is most commonly translated as “gospel” and, though there could be interesting speculation as to what guided the decisions to render it as “good news” or “wonderful story,” we will use here the translation in Mark’s opening verse that mirrors the composite name of the first four books of the New Testament: The Gospels.¹ Not only is Mark the only Gospel to explicitly proclaim itself to be a “gospel,” but, according to Werner Kelber, Mark departs from the typical use of the word “gospel,” which at that time meant “announcement” or “proclamation delivered in oral form,” and uses the word to refer not only to the written word, but also, in the first verse mentioned above, to his text as an account of Jesus’s biography rather than a record of Christ’s oral proclamations (1979: 16). This self-designated Gospel, written in not very literate *koiné* Greek infused with transliterations from Aramaic by an anonymous author probably from Syria or northern Galilee (Helms 1997: 6, 9; Kelber 1979: 13),² was a major source for the authors of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke who, as we will see, also greatly modified Mark as they incorporated it into their own future Gospels.

About 1,900 years after what we now call The Gospel According to Mark was written, Jorge Luis Borges’s published the short story “The Gospel According to Mark (“El evangelio según Marcos,” 1970/trans. Hurley 1998),” in which the main character, Baltasar Espinosa, orally imparts his Spanish translation of Mark from an English Bible to a family of farmhands in the Argentine pampas.³ In the

1. See Burrows (1925), which explores the history of the word we know (translated) as “gospel,” the differences in its uses in the Old and New Testaments, and the question of whether Jesus himself used the original term and what he might have meant by it.

2. The belief that it was written by the disciple Peter’s friend John Mark is now widely discredited (see Helms 1997: 2–3), although some scholars still claim Mark was “written among and for Romans” (Riddle 1924: 402).

3. Following the convention of naming books of the Bible, and to avoid confusion, the names of the biblical book Mark will be written in normal print, while the title of Borges’s short story will be in quotation marks.

course of the story, Espinosa, the translator who captivates the attention of his rural audience, ultimately becomes the Gospel itself, *the Word*, in the eyes of this family, which then stages a peculiar and surprising reenactment of the Passion Story detailed in the book Espinosa reads to them.

Borges often played with and problematized traditional notions of the transmission, dissemination, and, consequently, the translation of texts, and it was not infrequent for him to incorporate canonical works, such as Mark's gospel, into his playful, profound, and shocking fictions, providing readers with seemingly infinite avenues to explore these notions, whether through characters who are actually translating texts, or through the implied metaphor of translation for general processes of reading, writing, and interpretation, as well as the transformations inevitably involved in these activities.⁴ The plot of Borges's "The Gospel According to Mark" is one in which translation plays a major role, highlighting the very real complications involved in fulfilling the impossible task of neutrally reproducing some stagnate meaning that tradition demands from translators. The story clearly begs to be read against the backdrop of the biblical book by the same name, but we could also ask ourselves whether, in the other direction, Borges's "Mark" might not open some lines of questioning related to the way Bibles themselves have been read, interpreted, created, and disseminated.

The main goal of this article is to offer a reading of Borges's "Gospel According to Mark" that provides a compelling illustration of how translators always play a visible, i.e., creative, role in the work they perform (even when they do not want this role, or even realize they play it), something that will also become clear in the brief survey of the history of the Gospel of Mark I will present later. The visible role translators play is not a new idea as post-Nietzschean theory has helped open many new avenues of inquiry in translation studies, ones that question the traditional notion of translation as the simple transmission of stable meanings, avenues of inquiry that are still met with resistance even from some spheres within translation studies (see, for instance, Chesterman 2014), let alone outside the field. The picture Borges paints in "Mark" of the characters' interaction with the Bible (and with one another through the Bible) provides a lush ground for reflections on the complicated relationships established between the translator, text, and readership, reflections, raising a myriad of theoretical issues. At the same time, this

4. Some examples (found in *Collected Fictions*, Borges 1999a) include: The Bible (in "The Gospel according to Mark"); an invented ancient text about "primitive" Christians reading the Bible (in "The Sect of the Thirty"); *Don Quixote* (in "Pierre Menard"); translations of Aristotle by Muslim scholars (in "Averroes's Search"); or a mixture of many of these in a peculiar library (in "The Library of Babel"). For explorations of Borges's work and their intersection with translation, see, for example, Arrojo (2014) and Waisman (2005).

venture opens the possibility of introducing, making accessible, and expanding upon some of the complex notions regarding translation that stem from contemporary, post-Nietzschean theory through the exploration of particular metaphors or the examination of fictional representations of translators.⁵ Furthermore, because the story revolves around the translation of a particular book of the Bible, it offers the opportunity to reflect on the “real” history of Bible translation in conjunction with this fictional representation. That is, while Borges’s story might seem to some readers to portray an absurd misreading of the biblical Mark, it can also effectuate discussion of the historical creation, translation, and dissemination of this book (and by extension, the Bible as a whole). This is not insignificant, given that Bible translation has historically had such an influence on the way texts in general are viewed in the West for believers and non-believers alike, not to mention its influence around the world with the spread of Christianity. As Michel Foucault asserts, modern literary criticism stems from the Christian tradition and its “desire to ‘recover’ the author from a work” (Foucault 1977: 127), a hallmark, not only of Bible translation, but also a viewpoint that has helped establish many of the clichés associated with translation that still endure today. When we approach “The Gospel According to Mark” and *The Gospel According to Mark* in tandem, we will also draw attention to the fact that thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even millions of nameless translators, interpreters, and scribes have been responsible for actually writing what is now, in a fragmented form, the Bible.

The events at *Los Alamos*

In late March 1928, Baltasar Espinosa, a thirty-three year old medical student from Buenos Aires, travels with his cousin Daniel to the latter’s ranch, “Los Alamos,” south of a small town in the province of Buenos Aires. Daniel must return to the city to conduct some business and Espinosa stays behind. Soon a storm ensues, flooding all the roads, isolating him on the ranch with only the foreman’s family, the Gutres, consisting of a father, a son, and a young girl “of uncertain paternity” (Borges 1999: 398). They are a quiet, uneducated bunch and have reddish hair but with indigenous features. The flood compromises the family’s house and Espinosa gives them a room at the back of the main house by the tool shed, bringing all

5. Most of Borges’s writing predated the advent of the main tendencies of post-Nietzschean thought in the twentieth century and many of the prominent twentieth century theorists and philosophers drew from Borges as a kind of precursor to their thought (see, for example, Blanchot 1955; Deleuze 1989; de Man 1964; Derrida 1985; Foucault 1994).

four together under one roof. They dine together at night. Conversation is difficult because the Gutres are almost mute and do not seem to know how to explain anything about their lives. After unsuccessful attempts at reading to them from the few books lying around the house, Espinosa comes across an old English Bible whose last pages list the family's history. Espinosa learns that the *Guthries* came from Scotland in the nineteenth century, probably as peasant laborers who intermixed with the indigenous population. The recorded lineage ends in the 1870s when, it appears, the remaining family members lost the ability to read and write. The Gutres no longer speak English, and their Spanish is not very good either. Espinosa tries anew to read to them, this time from this Bible with commanding gold letters on the binding. He opens it at random to the Gospel of Mark, and they are immediately enthralled. They devour their food every night in anticipation of his readings. During this time Espinosa begins to grow his beard; he "miraculously" cures a wound on the little girl's lamb with pills instead of the spider webs the family wanted to use; and he is followed around the house by the three who also gather up the crumbs he drops on the table. After finishing his reading of Mark, Espinosa tries to continue to another Gospel, but the family insists he read the same one again so they can fully understand it. The father consults Espinosa to clarify certain points from the story. Espinosa, a "freethinker like his father" (ibid.: 401), does not believe in the literal nature of the Bible, but feels he must defend what he has been reading to them. The foreman asks:

"Did Christ allow himself to be killed in order to save mankind?"

"Yes," he finally replied. "To save all mankind from hell."

"What is hell?" Gutre asked him.

"A place underground where souls burn in fire forever."

"And those who drove the nails in will also be saved?"

"Yes," replied Espinosa, whose theology was a bit shaky. (Ibid.)

After lunch they ask to hear the last chapters again. Espinosa is awoken from his *siesta* by the sound of hammering. The family kneels before him, asks for his blessing, then curses him, spits at him, and drives him to the back of the house. As he feared, on the other side of the door, there was a cross waiting for him, built with the broken boards from the roof of the tool shed.

Spiny authority

At the onset of the deluge, while contemplating the flooded fields, Espinosa, whose name evokes, among other things,⁶ the “spiny” crown worn by Christ at the crucifixion, recalls a metaphor that compares the *pampas* to the sea, and that Henry Hudson remarked, “the sea seems the grander of the two because we view it not from horseback or our own height, but from the deck of a ship” (Borges 1999: 398). Espinosa’s observation frames this section because it highlights the significance of individual perspective in defining truth. We know very little of the Gutres’ perspective that leads them to enact the Passion with Espinosa as their Christ. The narrator claims that the family “had no faith, though in their veins, alongside the superstitions of the pampas, there still ran a dim current of Calvinist’s harsh fanaticism” (ibid.: 400). We can wonder whether these remnants from their distant Calvinism framed their interpretation of Espinosa’s reading, or if, perhaps, there was some “dim current” that tied their present situation to the biblical story of the Great Flood, thus placing them squarely within the stories of the Bible. Do they realize Espinosa was the same age as Jesus at his crucifixion? Or are these just interpretative queues for us readers? We cannot know. We only know, at least according to the narrator, that they seem to be ignorant about the world outside of their immediate surroundings – of which the city-dweller Espinosa is clearly ignorant (ibid.: 398). They hardly seem to possess language even to explain their knowledge of their own environment, as opposed to Espinosa, a medical student, who has “a gift for public speaking that had won him more than one prize” (ibid.: 397). Espinosa recalls his father’s words that “all the cases of longevity that occur in the country are the result of either a poor memory or a vague notion of dates – gauchos quite often know neither the year they were born in nor the name of the man that fathered them” (ibid.: 399). Espinosa does not believe that the Gutres are even capable of knowing themselves the way he does, let alone possess any intellectual capacity for interpretation. He reads the Bible in the first place for himself, “to try his hand at translating,” and to pass the time in the awkward silences after dinner (ibid.), but second, to continue his amateur ethnographic assessment of the family and maybe confirm his opinions; he reads to “see if they might understand a little of it” (ibid.: 400). Surprised at the fact that they listen attentively to his oral Spanish translation (of a written English translation) of the Bible after they had showed such little interest in the previous books he had found

6. “Espinosa” could also draw a connection to Spinoza, the Jewish-Dutch philosopher who was issued a writ of *cherem* (Jewish “excommunication”) in 1656 because of his subversive views on the interpretation of scripture, views that, though critical of Christianity, nevertheless, had a major impact on the foundation of modern Biblical criticism (Gottlieb 2007: 286–287).

around the house, Espinosa attributes their fascination not so much to an interest in the story itself, but to the fact that “[t]he presence of gold letters on the binding may have given [the Bible] increased authority,” and thinks to himself, “[i]t’s in their blood” (ibid.) – that is, the Gutres are like little children or primitive people, wooed by sparkling gold. Based on his urban and academic worldview, Espinosa judges the Gutres to be inferior although they are actually a complete Other to Espinosa and probably to most of Borges’s readers. At the same time, the Gutres and Espinosa (and some readers of Borges) do seem to share common perspectives: a belief in the supremacy of the author’s mastery over meaning and the idea that the key to understanding a particular text comes from the one perceived to be the origin of meaning.

Perhaps to some readers of “The Gospel According to Mark” (and, initially, to the Gutres), Espinosa appears as a ridiculous character on the ranch, devoid of any kind of practical authority. What the narrator says he learns, things “he hadn’t known, had never even expected,” are risible; the fact that he learns that, when riding a horse, one does not need to gallop when approaching the house, or that “nobody goes out on a horse unless there is a job to be done” (ibid.: 398), hardly converts him into someone with practical knowledge of life in the country. Nevertheless, he seems confident in himself, being the educated person he is and with an authority endowed in him as the surrogate master of the house. When the rain begins, he seems to hinder the family as he tries to help (ibid.), and fails at his first attempts at engaging the Gutres with the books in the house because they are uninterested in written (often romanticized) depictions of the world they actually inhabited (ibid.: 399). It is only after he begins reading Mark, after evoking the Protagonist of Nazareth standing before the masses, and after “recalling his elocution classes [...] and [rising] to his feet to preach the parables” (ibid.: 400), do we see the Gutres show any veneration toward Espinosa as an authority figure in this land he seems so inept to “rule over.” Only when the Bible readings commence are we told that “with Daniel gone, [Espinosa] had taken the master’s place and begun to give timid orders, which were immediately followed,” and, almost like disciples, the “Gutres would trail him through the rooms and along the hallways, as if they were lost” (ibid.). It seems that, for the Gutres, Espinosa and the Book fuse together and, indeed, each one endows the other with authority – the Bible validates Espinosa by providing him a vehicle through which he can exhibit his rhetorical skills and show that he can generate meaning from this book that exhibits such a commanding physical presence; at the same time, Espinosa validates the Bible because he brings the gilded stack of bound lettered words to life for the Gutres, who cannot read and had previously seemed so uninterested in the written word.

The portrayal of the Gutres mirrors the way some scholars of Mark believe that its author viewed Jesus’s disciples. Kelber, for example, dedicates a whole chapter to

the “Blindness of the Disciples,” in which he shows how they did not understand Jesus’s message or the significance of his mission (1979: 30–42. See also Ehrman 2005: 68). Like the Gutres, the disciples did show an interest in understanding what they were being told, but both seem to have failed in discerning what the speaker intended. When Espinosa tries to read another Gospel upon completing Mark, the “father ask[s] him to reread the one he’d just finished, *so they could understand it better*” (Borges 1999: 400, my emphasis), thus showing a real willingness to assimilate the meaning they believed the text contained. Espinosa, though, sees them not as wisdom-seekers but “like children, who prefer repetition to variety or novelty” (ibid.).

The question remains: what is the text to which the Gutres are listening with steadfast attention? Espinosa – who does not believe in the literal truth of the Bible but nevertheless feels compelled to defend what he has read them – sees himself as a mere conduit for a story. He is not trying to teach the Gutres anything; for him, his “preaching” is a rhetorical activity, a form of translation practice, and an attempt to discover whether these farmhands are capable of understanding anything. As Brett Levinson writes, Espinosa sees no relation between his own presentation of the Gospels and whatever it is they understand (2005: 9). The Gutres “will ‘get what they get’ because of who or what they are, due to their intelligence level and social place. And they are who or what they are because of what they ‘get’” (ibid.). This cyclical logic is lost on Espinosa for, as Levinson explains, Espinosa believes that meaning comes before and is independent from its linguistic manifestations (ibid.), which is why:

Espinosa does not strive to teach the Gospel since that is not rhetoric’s purpose. [...] In fact, a good translator and rhetorician, from Espinosa’s perspective, less transforms English to Spanish, transmits word to ear, persuades, convinces, or instructs than returns an original inscription to its home address: turns a text (or subject) back into itself. (ibid.)

Espinosa’s view of his task is not altogether different from the traditional exigencies demanded of translators: the meaning in the original precedes the words, words beneath which readers and translators must look to find authors’ thoughts or intentions, then translators must serve as conduits, providing nothing more or less than the essence that resides within this original. Espinosa believes himself to be an “invisible” translator, fulfilling the traditional, “commonsense” duty of the translator.

Examples of traditional views of translation and expectations placed on translators abound in introductions to contemporary Bible translations. The “Preface to the New American Bible” (1970), for instance, states that this translation, made from “the original and the oldest available texts of the sacred books, [...] aims

to convey as directly as possible the thought and individual style of the inspired writers,” and goes on to say that “better understanding of Hebrew Greek, and the steady development of the science of textual criticism, the fruit of patient study since the time of St. Jerome, have allowed translators and editors in their use of all available materials to approach more closely than ever before the sense of what the sacred authors actually wrote” (Holy See website). Similarly, J. B. Phillips, in the “Preface” to his volume containing seven translations plus his own translation of the New Testament, lists as the second of his three “essential principles of translation [...] that a translator does his work with the least possible obtrusion of his own personality” (1984: xxi). Both cases illustrate certain expectations for the kind of translator Espinosa believed himself to be, albeit with different motivations. The first example reveals the belief that the evolution of contemporary scientific (impersonal, unbiased, objective) reading can bring us closer to what “the sacred authors really wrote” (i.e., what the authors *meant*), while the second reiterates the importance of producing a text that remains free from subjective interference from the translator. These expectations are not confined to biblical translation. We could take as an example the largest organization for professional translators in the United States, the American Translators Association (ATA), comprised of around 11,000 members from more than ninety countries. The rules governing those taking the online Continuing Education course, possibly with the goal of passing the ATA-sponsored certification exams, determines that candidates must sign a form in which they “pledge to abide by ATA’s Code of Ethics and Professional Practice,” a code the first stipulation of which states that translators must “convey meaning between people and cultures faithfully, accurately, and impartially” so that they relay “the message as the author or speaker intended with the same emotional impact on the audience,” and ensure that “nothing is added or omitted in the target message” (ATA website).

Espinosa is not intending to spread God’s Word like J. B. Phillips or those who wrote The New American Bible, nor is he aspiring to become a professional translator like so many who attempt to acquire the prestigious ATA certification, but he does seem to share the same notion that translators can (and should) achieve the kind of true invisibility that demonstrates their attempt to maintain a clear separation between authors and the meaning with which they endow their texts, and translators, who act as conduits for this meaning. The story of Espinosa and the Gutres, however, complicates this line of thinking. As noted, Espinosa believed himself to be an invisible translator, simply communicating what he saw as a story, washing his hands of any involvement with the “message” according to the Christian understanding of the Bible. At the same time, he saw it as his duty to clarify to the father certain points of the story when asked. Although he was speculating, he became even more implicated as a biblical interpreter by creating

meaning for his audience when asked for clarification. As a “mere” translator he had previously no expectations that he would have to clarify words that were not his own with words and that were “taken as gospel” by those who heard him.

Though we cannot know exactly what was behind the Gutres’ interpretation of the reading situation that spurred their reenactment of the crucifixion, it seems that we cannot really talk about the translator being or not being invisible. Rather, it is the *process of translation* that is invisible for the Gutres. They seem to view Espinosa, the translator, as the author of what he reads, as the origin of meaning, as the text itself. For them, there is no process of translation occurring – Espinosa is the “original.”

It would be inaccurate to equate the Gutres as an audience of a translator/translation with the general way translations are viewed and discussed in much of the rest of the world where they form part of and are considered in a larger network of interpretative communities. Translators’ names do not typically supplant those of the authors; in fact, it is very much to the contrary. Translators’ work is usually subsumed by the authors’ names. What brings together traditional notions of translation that still persist today and the Gutres’ interaction with Espinosa in the plot of “Mark” is the invisibility of the process of translation, which leads to an obfuscation of the critical, authorial role translators play in creating the texts that are read by an audience that is hardly aware of translation. Espinosa harbors no desire to act as an author, but his audience places him in this role. From translators who refrain from acknowledging any authorial role by swearing oaths or simply proclaiming that they are doing their best to “stay close to the original,” transferring only “the authors’ intentions,” to translators who exemplify the cliché of the frustrated author who would write “original” work if they could, and thus desire, as Milan Kundera says, “consciously or unconsciously to invest the text with [their] own creativity” (1995: 101), translators of all kinds are endowed by their audience with a certain authorial authority, whether or not they attempt to remain in the shadow of the author. Reading audiences are perhaps unaware that they force upon translators such an important role, and tradition dictates that they scorn this very idea but, nevertheless, the translator’s writing may be the only window they have onto the author’s work. Upon recognizing this, translators should realize that, unlike Espinosa, they must become aware of the possible consequences of their choices for their readership (realizing, though, that one cannot foresee all circumstances, as Espinosa could attest to) instead of embracing the fantasy that they are merely repeating the text they are translating. Perhaps translation becomes, then, a more arduous task. While translators do not supplant the author, they play a fundamental role in shaping the image of this author in another language and culture and often have an impact on the way the original is read. An obvious example can be found in Borges himself. As mentioned in footnote five, many postmodern

thinkers reference Borges, but, at the same time, they have shaped the reading of his work through the lenses of their theory. Furthermore, if, as Levinson argues, meaning is not excavated from texts but attributed after the fact, then the translators' work is all the more important because this new, necessarily transformed text will provide a different object, along with other translations and metatexts (most notably with canonical texts), to which a new readership will attribute meaning.

The Gutres' interpretation of Espinosa's translation of a translation (which was already the product of 1,500 years of translations and interpretations) is at the center of Borges's story. While we cannot fully understand how the Gutres divined their call to action, or regardless of how sound one believes their understanding of Espinosa's translation to be, the countless biblical allusions in "Mark" beg to be framed against the backdrop of the rich history of well-known biblical stories, from the parallel images of the flood to the bearded Espinosa, as healer, reciting Christ's story to his quiet disciples who follow him around collecting his breadcrumbs, to the names of the "masters of the house," Baltasar Espinosa and his cousin Daniel.⁷ The Book of Mark thus becomes a fundamental character in the plot.

At the same time, and perhaps more unconventionally, we could reverse the frames and read the biblical Mark in light of Borges's "Mark," or read them into each other to question or rethink certain widespread notions regarding God's Word in written form, notions that, as stated in the introduction, have helped establish a foundation that has had an immeasurable impact on the way authorship, readership, and translation have been viewed for at least two thousand years. Some readers of the story of Espinosa's demise may ask the question: could this piece not be read in a very traditional manner in which the erudite (though perhaps aloof) translator Espinosa performs an excellent rendition of the text and the Gutres, in their ignorant misunderstanding, simply confirm his initial suspicion that they really do not "understand anything?" Nancy Abraham Hall, for example, reads this story as a warning, "like *Don Quijote*, [of] the dangers of misreading texts" (2002: 528), thus positing the idea that there is, in fact, a correct reading. Perhaps this question can be addressed by changing focus from Borges's Mark to the biblical Gospel from which it draws inspiration and to which it constantly alludes. Clearly these two narratives are profoundly separated by vast expanses of time and space, have been disseminated in different ways before being brought

7. It is worthy of note that Borges drew a very clear connection to Daniel in his "Mark" through the owner of the ranch, Daniel, and his surrogate Baltasar Espinosa, whose first name is the Greek translation of both the Babylonian name Balteshazzar given to the captive Daniel by Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 1:7), as well as Balshazzar, Nebuchadnezzar's son and last King of Babylonia (Daniel 5:2, 30). However, most scholars claim that other historical inscriptions indicate he was actually the eldest son of Nabonidus, who was the last king of Babylon (see Grabbe 1988).

before us today, and are of significantly different historical importance. However, by examining some of the history of the biblical Mark, the Gutres' reading might not be considered absurd. It may be understood as a kind of satire that serves to highlight elements of the actual history of Mark (and possibly of the Bible in general), a history that helps problematize the aforementioned foundation upon which the traditional notion of translation has been constructed, one that still depends on simplistic notions of origins and originals, authors' intentions, perfect repetitions and present, stable, and obtainable truths. Here we will take a detour in order to illustrate some of these claims by examining the early history of Mark as well as the formation of the Latin Vulgate. Because these ancient texts have been studied and translated more than any others, we will only be able to scratch the surface of their complex past, but hopefully our cursory glance will help address some of the questions at hand and enrich our reading of Borges's "Mark" (and maybe vice versa).

Early manuscripts of Mark

Let us begin by sketching a general picture of the long and complicated trajectory Mark made from around 70 CE (disputably) in or near Syria (Helms 1997: 6–7; Kelber 1979: 13) all the way to the hands of Espinosa in the Argentine *pampas* in 1928. Many scholars believe Mark's author looked back to the then recent destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans to impel his narrative of Jesus. Both Kelber and Helms note an undeniable preoccupation in Mark with the Roman-Jewish War and the loss of the Temple, which serve as the backdrop for the Gospel (Kelber 1979: 13–14; Helms 1997: 24), understandable given the general belief that the destruction of the Temple would be directly connected with the coming of the Messiah (Kelber 1979: 67–68). Helms focuses on Mark's "apocalyptic mind," which he believes comes from a combination of the events of the time together with a reading of the Old Testament apocalyptic Book of Daniel (1997: 21). The Book of Daniel, written in the second century BCE (although many evangelicals believe it is from the sixth, as the book presents itself), recounts Daniel's capture by the Babylonians and eventual service to King Nebuchadnezzar. Through interpretations of the King's dreams and his own visions, Daniel "foretells" (if it were from the sixth century BCE) the fall of Babylonia to the Medo-Persian Empire, then to the Greeks and, finally, the Seleucid King Antiochus IV, who sparked the Maccabean Revolts (160s BCE, around the time the Book of Daniel is believed to have really been written). During this time of great persecution against the Jews, Daniel predicts that "abomination and destruction" will bring about the "time of the end" and "tribulation as has not been" (ibid.: 38, quoting Daniel 12: 1,

11), identical words Mark uses from the Septuagint (*ibid.*, quoting Mark 13:19). According to Helms, because the end of times did not come in the 160s BCE as predicted in Daniel, Mark's author reinterpreted and applied Daniel's message to his own era as he tried to make sense of it (*ibid.*: 24) and believed Christ's impending return would occur around 74 CE (*ibid.*: 8). Perhaps the urgency of an imminent Messianic Kingdom accounts for why more than half of the Gospel of Mark is focused on the Passion story.

As mentioned, as the first Gospel written, Mark had a profound influence on the authors of Matthew and Luke, the former incorporating about ninety percent of Mark, and the latter around fifty percent (Helms 1997: 80), though both frequently made changes to verses they copied to correct Mark's mistakes related to misquoted Old Testament Scripture and historical and geographical inaccuracies (*ibid.*: 10–11). In addition to alterations made by Matthew and Luke, a significant difference between Mark and the other Gospels is the fact that it begins directly with Jesus's baptism and ends rather abruptly when the three women who came to anoint Jesus's body discover the empty tomb and are told that Jesus has risen and is gone. There is no appearance of the risen Christ in Mark, whereas Matthew and Luke contain extensive introductions, including the virgin conception and birth of Christ, concluding with Jesus reuniting with his disciples after his resurrection. The absence of this in Mark was so unsettling that scribes soon composed new endings for it: the "shorter version" that consists of only a few lines indicating Jesus appeared to the Apostles, and the "longer version," which continues from 13:9–20 and includes Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene, then to the disciples, followed by his commission for them to spread the Gospel around the world, and His ascension into heaven.⁸ Matthew's and Luke's authors seemed uncomfortable with Mark and probably composed their own narratives explicitly to supersede this book that they did not believe measured up to the status of "scripture," which they themselves aspired to write (Helms 1997: 42–45; Smith 2000: 10; Stanton 1997). Some present-day scholars even wonder why Mark's fate, becoming a Gospel, was different from that of the long-lost text Q, thought to contain Jesus's sayings and believed to be the other text in the hands of both Matthew's and Luke's authors while composing their Gospels (Dewey 2004: 495).

In addition to alterations made to Mark by Matthew and Luke in their own texts, Mark underwent greater transformations in the thousands of copied

8. Some scholars believe that the earliest manuscripts are already corrupted and that there must have been a lost conclusion that was later reinstated or, in some cases, recreated from the text of Matthew (see Goodspeed 1905; Brown 2003). It should be mentioned that one real consequence of this appended ending, based on Mark 16:17–18, is the practice of the (sometimes deadly) practice of snake handling in the worship services by some Pentecostal Churches.

handwritten manuscripts (Ehrman 2005:98) produced to disseminate it. Only copies exist today, copies that differ from one another, sometimes in minor, sometimes in significant ways. Ehrman writes that there are many (erroneous) “accidental” changes, as well as many “intentional” changes, alterations made to correct factual errors, to modify or conform to certain interpretative, theological, doctrinal traditions, for liturgical reasons, often taking the form of harmonizing similar passages from different books (2005:94–97), or to address apologetic concerns related to the assumed character of Jesus (*ibid.*: 200–201). However, the modifications and clarifications were not necessarily nefarious; copyists probably “changed their texts to make them say what they were already thought to mean” (*ibid.* 2005:34), even if it left future readers with significantly different versions of the “same” verses. Apart from versions, some of the most popular sayings of Jesus seemed to have been added later by scribes.

Examples of two such changes can be found in Mark 1:1–2. It seems that after the opening verse marking “[t]he beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ,” some scribes added the phrase, “the Son of God,” which is absent in the oldest manuscripts. Perhaps this addition served to strengthen certain claims made in the rest of the New Testament; in any case, it has been preserved in most versions of the Bible today (although some versions do mention in notes that it is absent in early texts). The earliest manuscripts of Mark 1:2 begin (in translation) with “as is written by Isaiah the prophet,” although what follows does not come directly from Isaiah but is a mixture of verses from Septuagint Exodus 23:20, then a paraphrase of Hebrew Malachi 3:1, and finally a short paraphrase of Septuagint Isaiah 40:3 (Helms 1997:3–4). Many scribes sought to change this erroneous citation of Isaiah to the non-specific “as is written in the prophets.” Most English translations of Mark 1:2, with the King James being the one exception, still maintain the original error. Metzger points out that some of the differences between the countless English versions of the Bible come not from “variant renderings of the same Greek word but variant readings in the basic Greek text” (1992:221), that is, from different “originals.”

Evolution of the Vulgate

From the end of the second century CE and throughout the third, translations of parts of the Bible appeared in Old Latin from Syria, across North Africa, and Rome (Metzger 1977:286–288). Having most likely evolved from reading Greek Scripture accompanied by oral translations into the vernacular during worship services, the eventual written versions are fragmented, often too literal and inelegant, and exhibit a certain freedom on the part of the scribes who often mixed in their own

traditions and additions (ibid.: 323–327), producing a chaos of manuscripts that “had become so mixed and corrupt that no two manuscripts agreed” (ibid.: 331). Pope Damasus (366–384 CE) decided to rectify the situation and chose Sophronius Eusebius Hieronymus, known today as Saint Jerome (c. 347–420 CE), to revise the extant texts and produce a “uniform and dependable” Bible based on the Greek originals (ibid.: 331, 333). Jerome’s revision was initially scorned, provoking unrest in churches because it did not conform to what many worshippers were used to. Ultimately, however, what came to be known as Jerome’s Vulgate withstood the test of time (ibid.: 334). The importance and influence of Jerome’s Latin Vulgate cannot be underestimated. As Metzger states, its “extent of penetration into all areas of Western culture is well-nigh beyond calculation,” becoming integral in the development of the Romance Languages (ibid. 285) and, more importantly, according to Eugene Nida, the Vulgate “had an enormous influence on matters of canon, translation principles, and vocabulary employed in the Christian scriptures,” and “was viewed for more than 1000 years as the canonical translation, forming the basis for interpretation for any further translations” (Nida 1998: 23, 25). In a very real sense, the Vulgate supplanted all other biblical texts and, by the power held by the Holy Roman Empire, became the most legitimate manifestation of the Word of God, “taking precedence over all Hebrew and Greek texts until the sixteenth century and beyond” (Robinson 2002: 23).

However, as with Mark, there is no copy of Jerome’s original manuscript although, more than 10,000 varying copies of the Vulgate exist, and those are divided into different “schools”: the Italian, Spanish, Irish, French, and the recensions of both Alcuin and Theodulf (Metzger 1977: 334–347). Once again, there has been extensive research, analysis, and debate as to which Old Latin and Greek manuscripts were used by Jerome as the multifarious factions set out to create a standardized Vulgate from the differing copies of his work. Gutenberg’s printing press, invented in 1439, allowed for the realization of more standard copies to be made of the Bible. After several critical versions of the Vulgate were published and revised multiple times, the Council of Trent declared the Vulgate’s authority in 1546, establishing that nobody may “dare or presume under any pretext whatsoever to reject it” (Preston and Jenkins 2007: 228). After Pope Sixtus V’s failed attempt to finalize the authoritative edition in 1590, Pope Clement VIII issued what has become known as the “Clementine Vulgate,” which is still the official Latin Bible of the present Roman Catholic Church.

While the Vulgate is undoubtedly the most influential Bible in history, many other canonical translations followed, some of which, like the Vulgate, took on the status of “originals” for their readers, all of them with unique histories that established their canonical status as true bearers of the Word, regardless of their variations. Luther’s German Bible (1534) and the English King James (1611), for

instance, were both produced in times of great political and religious unrest, which had a direct impact on questions related to who possessed the authority to interpret and translate God's Word. Who can speak for God? The multiplicity of differing Bibles, reflecting a multiplicity of biblical interpretation, continues, of course, to this day and, though the written Word is what supposedly unites all those who identify themselves as Christians, it could also be said that Christians are a people divided by one book, the Bible.⁹ Although it is difficult to say how many different English Bibles are currently in use, or how many there are altogether, according to the American Bible Society (ABS), it is estimated that, "complete or not," there are around 900 translations and paraphrases of the Bible in English, pointing readers to William Chamberlain's *Catalogue of English Bible Translations* (1991), the most comprehensive bibliography on the subject with its 806 pages (ABS webpage).

The Bibles we have now, and the Bible that was in the hands of Espinosa as he read to the Gutres, have a long, complicated, albeit extremely interesting history filled with a plethora of differing texts, both within one language and across languages through translation. As mentioned before, this Book has had an enormous impact on Western notions of textuality that have helped create and reinforce the most common clichés about translation stemming from serious attempts to divine the true, unchanging message of the one who is often called its "true" author, God, who entrusted humans with his message in language. Ironically, as this brief survey of only a fraction of the Bible indicates, its very history destabilizes these notions that are still deeply entrenched in the minds of so many of its readers. To illustrate these thoughts and reconnect them to the earlier part of this article, we will conclude by returning to those characters we left in the Argentine *pampas* a few pages back.

Conclusions

Espinosa thinks, right before commencing his reading of the scriptures that "throughout history, humankind has told two stories: the story of a lost ship sailing the Mediterranean seas in quest of a beloved isle and the story of god who allows himself to be crucified on Golgotha" (Borges 1999: 400). This speaks to the notion of repetition throughout history although, as we have seen during our detour into Bible history as well as in Borges's story, repetition itself is never pure

9. For a contemporary example, see Peter Thuesen's *In Discordance with the Scriptures* (1999) for a fascinating analysis of the bitter divisiveness that ensued among US Christians as new translations, alternatives to the King James, were being created, divisions that even led to Christians burning the Bibles of other Christian denominations.

or complete. For example, the Gutres' name differs from that of their ancestors; Daniel's and Baltasar Espinosa's names are repetitions of names related to the biblical book by the same title as the story in which they find themselves, but in a very different time, place, and context. Other repetitions in Borges's story evoke the biblical Mark, but, clearly, this story does not repeat the biblical text in a way Bible translators have attempted to do throughout the ages. However, as we have seen, from those well-intentioned and conscientious translators from the era in which the originals were produced to those translating in the present day, the idea of perfect repetition is an impossibility. Borges's story, then, is an exaggeration that draws attention to what is present in all endeavors to repeat the same, an endeavor that is often seen as the goal of translation.

The Bible Espinosa translates is a translation, an old book that links the Gutres back to their disconnected past. Ehrman points out that, from the beginning, Christianity was a "bookish" religion, inheriting the Jewish tradition that "stressed certain texts as authoritative scripture," but that "we don't actually have these authoritative texts;" instead, this "textually oriented religion" is based on manipulated "copies that vary from one another in highly significant ways" (2005: 69). Furthermore, the vast majority of the early Christians (and the general populace), including some or all of the Apostles, were illiterate and relied on oral recitation of the Scriptures in worship in scenes that might evoke the image of Espinosa reading to the Gutres.

We can return to the question, then, if this audience simply "misreads" the Word, though most would concur that they clearly do not interpret the text in a way Espinosa or most of Christian tradition would expect, even given the multiple, conflicting readings that exist in the Christian world. In the first place, as I mentioned earlier, to say this is a "misreading" implies there could be a non-misreading, and we might wonder where one seeks out this correct reading. It cannot be stressed enough, as it is still the mainstream conception and also prevalent in translation studies, that one looks to the "original," or its counterpart, "origins," in search of what authors (here, God via inspired humans) really meant and not corruptions caused by other interpreters or translators, as argued by Phillips and the "Preface to the New American Bible." But as we saw in the previous section, this is far from a simple, or even possible task. Wherefore, then, do we find meaning?

Here we can turn back to Espinosa gazing at the flooded fields pondering the idea of perspective, that is, interpretative frameworks. The Bible has, almost since its beginnings, been read from different perspectives, including by those who wrote it. Mark read Daniel in the context of what he was trying to write about in his time; Matthew's and Luke's authors read Mark from a different region, with a different agenda, and with a different audience in mind, hence the liberties they took reworking this "original" Gospel; key parts of early Church doctrine, such as

the Trinity and the Incarnation, ideas that are still ingrained in much of modern Christendom, were developed primarily through the lenses of philosophical ideas borrowed from early pagan philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle (see Wolfson 1970). It is not far-fetched to propose that many of the divisions among Christians today regarding issues such as, say, the place of women in the church, homosexuality, abortion, evolution, the death penalty, war and punishment, stem from beliefs that are read into the Bible from pre-existing frames of reference, frames that, in a circular manner, might have been informed by readings of the Bible. Clearly, some of these frames are more profoundly ingrained in our interpretive capacities (e.g., the influence of the pagan philosophers is far more entrenched in Christian theology, and in thought in general, than the ideas that inform the aforementioned contemporary debates), but meaning could not “happen” if one did not confront an interpretative situation without an interpretative framework that precedes the creation of meaning, something overlooked by Espinosa as he accidentally portrayed himself as a Messiah. Here is the source of much misunderstanding regarding postmodern notions of language, meaning, and dissemination. In translation studies, for example, it is often said that such notions lead one to relativist views, in which translators could make things mean whatever they want them to, an “anything goes” approach that would lead to chaos, thus making it impossible to rely on translations.¹⁰

This view ignores the inevitable nature of conventions. Conventions are what make shared meaning among a community possible. There are countless conventions that have been built up around biblical interpretation and translators must always be aware that they are working with certain conventions that make their work possible. (“Convention” should not be confused with the word “consensus,” since, as we can see with the differences among ancient manuscripts, biblical traditions, or even contemporary denominations and their disparate Bible translations, there is not a common consensus on the meaning of the Bible, nor a consensus on what the conventions are for dealing with it.) Conventions are not absolute or eternal, and the fact that meaning is bound to them implies that it will change. At the same time, they are closely linked with power structures that struggle among themselves in order to establish “correct” conventions. The convention to keep much of what the scribes changed or added to the older manuscripts of Mark has been reinforced throughout history; the Vulgate became *the* Word of God through the power of the Roman Empire that established the convention of translating from the Latin Vulgate instead of the original texts.

10. See Chesterman (2014) who warns of relativism and believes there is a scientific way, one that is above and before ideology to test all European and non-European approaches, but does not acknowledge the European basis for this “scientific” examination.

What is so shocking about the Gutres is that they follow none of the typical conventions we are accustomed to when interacting with the written word or conventional biblical interpretation. Certainly they do have conventions we do not fully understand, ones that seem to be related to a literal reading that fuses the written word with a person (not altogether different from the fusion of God and Christ into Their Holy Word), causing them to render their interpretation into their seemingly violent act (though, certainly not the worst atrocity committed in the name of Biblical interpretation). As unconventional as it may seem, the Gutres made the text relevant to their lives, apparently in search of salvation as they understood it. They are also a stark example of how, even with strong conventions in place, words and meaning cannot ultimately be controlled or contained, no matter the intentions of the utterer or the good will of the interpreter. Translators are on both ends of this exchange: they interpret and engender new utterances that will also undergo interpretation; they are both readers and writers, as Espinosa is a reader of a book that knows not where it is leading its reader, and he is an interpreter for an audience whose interpretation he cannot control.

It can probably be agreed upon that Borges's "Mark" is brilliant and shocking because of its playful pseudo-repetition and departures from the biblical book whose name it "repeats," but one may still see this as merely a fun story involving farmhands who are ignorant of modern conventions. We have read the story in light of the history of the book it is named after, but, in closing, is it possible that the Bible could be read in light of this story or, at the very least, in the meeting between the two texts? The Gutres did an excellent job at drawing connections between the story they heard and their immediate surroundings. Their final response might be called "absurd" because it clearly follows none of the accepted conventions for interpreting the biblical text. However, since we saw in the previous sections the rich, erratic, and sometimes unknown histories that produced the fragmented Mark and the Vulgate, which different conventions have tried to sew together, could we not say that the Gutres' response is no less absurd than pretending that Mark, and by extension, the Bible today is, has been, and forever will be the "same" book?

It is fitting to end with an anecdote by the legendary Bible translator and linguist Eugene Nida, who recounts a story of a Bible translator:

After completing the translation of the Bible in one of the major trade languages of West Africa, the translator returned home on leave of absence and decided to take some courses in linguistics. He soon realized how many mistakes he had made in his earlier work, and upon returning to the field he asked the responsible committee to let him revise his translation. But he was told that he had no right to "change the word of the Lord!" (Nida 1998:25)

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