

DUTCH BIBLE:

The Road to the STATENVERTALING

by *C. P. Hallihan*

Brief Background

To many in the United Kingdom, the Kingdom of The Netherlands is popularly referred to as Holland, a place of only windmills and tulips. North Holland and South

windmills in the country one hundred years ago, the figure now is less than a tenth of that.¹ Situated on the complex delta area of the Scheldt, Meuse (Maas) and Rhine rivers, The Netherlands has a long trading tradition—Rotterdam is the world's largest port. The land is mainly flat, 27% of it below sea level, protected by dunes, dykes and canals. Current population is over sixteen million, with two-thirds of that in the Randstad conurbation, the triangle of The Hague, Rotterdam and Utrecht. Recent religious returns give Roman Catholic at 36%, Protestant 27%, and other (including 'none') 37%. Presumably amongst the 'other' is included a very large and increasing Muslim community. (The number of people adhering to the Reformed Confessions—the Three



Holland are the names of but two of the twelve provinces of The Netherlands, and whilst there were reputedly 10,000



Forms of Unity—is estimated at about 500,000, making The Netherlands a land of considerable contrasts.)

The Reformation left The Netherlands divided, broadly speaking, into the strongly Protestant and Calvinist North and West, and the remaining Roman Catholic South and East. We know that during the crucial years of the English Reformation the country was not only in religious and political upheaval, but facing the threat of Spanish assault. If we multiply those factors with the additional one of actual Spanish rule and military presence in The Netherlands, we may just get the feel of the crucible in which the Dutch Reformation and pursuit of a vernacular Bible was wrought. Protestant pressure for freedom from the Spanish Hapsburg Empire began in 1568, and in January 1579 the northern provinces of

the Low Countries concluded the Union of Utrecht, breaking with Spain. The Eighty Years War (which includes the Thirty Years War) was well under way,² and it was not until 1648 that Spain would recognize the independence of the United Provinces as a *fait accompli*.

Our single concern in this article is the history of the Dutch Bible, for in the Statenvertaling of 1637 we have the last great example of the classic Reformation vernacular Bibles, worthy peer of the English Authorised Version. In all that we touch upon you should bear in mind that throughout the Reformation and Puritan eras connections between English and Dutch churches were strong. There were various English congregations in The Netherlands other than the well known Ainsworth and Robinson and other Brownist gatherings.

A Protestant service at the Grote Kerk , Haarlem, painted by Gerrit Berckheyde, 1673



Before Printing: Old Saxon to Johan Schutken

As we look at the early Dutch Bibles a similar pattern to that of English Bible history is plain to see. The Psalms were always the better known part of Scripture, and manuscript versions of them reflecting the complex linguistic and early cultural history of the Low Countries are known. Around the year 850 there was a selection of Psalms in an Old Saxon tongue. A hundred years later a Latin text of the Psalms was written by an unknown monk in the region of Venlo. This was significant, because it was an interlinear manuscript, with an Old-Dutch³ rendering under the Latin. In the 16th century this text was in the possession of Arnold Wachtendonck, and a copy made. Only the copy now remains, called the Wachtendonck Psalms.

In 1271 a 'Bible' in poetical form, the *Rijmbijbel*, appeared. Petrus Comestor had written a Latin work—*Historia*

Scolastica—in the late 12th century. This was a 'Bible History' using the Vulgate, Josephus, and the work of other Greek and Latin authors. It became a standard textbook in schools. Jacob van Maerlant then produced the *Rijmbijbel*, a

**A page from the
*Rijmbijbel***

rhyiming version of the *Historia*, which became very popular amongst those who could read no Latin: it was their only independent door to any kind of Bible knowledge.

The most complete manuscript work of the Middle Ages is the two volume *First History Bible*, 1360/1. This was done by an unknown Carthusian monk in the Brussels region, using a plain Dutch, avoiding latinized sentence-style. However, it was still Vulgate-based, and showing a strong dependence on the *Rijmbijbel* and the *Historia*.⁴ In the south, where it was published, this work was much opposed by the Roman Catholic Church, but found ready acceptance in the north, where as many as forty-five copies have survived. The *Second History Bible*, now assigned to the 15th century, was of similar genre, loosely following the Vulgate with various wanderings into legend.⁵

The last big name before printing in The Netherlands is that of Johan Schutken. He was a student of Geert de Groote, founder of the Brethren of the Common Life at Deventer,⁶ and reforming preacher in Utrecht. De Groote communicated to Schutken the need of a thoroughgoing Dutch Bible. The student addressed the task and, soon after 1400, the Psalms, Old Testament, and then New Testament were done. It is reputed to be a fluent and varied translation, attempting to reflect the different styles of the various parts of the Bible. This is the first truly Dutch translation, but, as we have seen in the English parallel of Wycliffe, was still hampered by having only Latin as a starting point. This was by far the most used Dutch Bible version of the Middle Ages. Whereas the Wycliffe Bible was never actually printed until the 18th cen-



ture, and then only as a curiosity, the Schutken Gospels were printed as the basis of a 'Daily Reader' in 1477. By 1522 some thirty-two editions had been published, incorporating readings from the Epistles and Old Testament also: an early *Daily Light*.

Early Printed Bibles

The first printed Dutch Scripture, translated from the Latin Vulgate, appeared in 1477. Printed by Jacob Jacobszoon van de Meer and Mauricius Yemantszoon, it is the very first printed book in The Netherlands—the Delft Bible. This is really a misnomer, as it was the Old Testament without Psalms, and still showing strong intake from the *History* Bibles. About 250 copies were made, some fifty known to exist today. A complete Bible in the Dutch language was produced in Cologne (Keulen) in 1478. At that time the Dutch language area extended to this ancient Roman Rhineland settlement. As the *Keulse Bijbel*, this appeared in two regional dialects, but in both of them the Song of Songs was printed in Latin! Then came the Liesvelt Bible. Jacob van Liesvelt produced this in Antwerp, 1526. It was based as far as possible on the German Bible of Luther (Luther had not completed his task at that point) supplemented by Liesvelt's own rendering of the Vulgate. His later editions were strongly 'Protestant' in the marginal notes, and the last edition of 1542⁷ was seen as a direct threat to the Roman Catholic Church, with such outspoken comment as 'man's salvation comes only by Jesus Christ'. Charged with heresy, Jacob van Liesvelt was beheaded at Antwerp, 6 November 1545.



The Delft Bible

Nevertheless, with the Statenvertaling still almost a century away, the Liesvelt Bible was the ordinary Bible of the Dutch Reformation.

Exploration of the Amsterdam-Antwerp printing and publishing industry and its impact on Bible production in many, many languages, must be passed over, but it was another Antwerp printer, Willem Vorsterman, who issued a Bible with the encouragement of the Roman Catholic authorities in 1528. Described as a mosaic of Luther, Erasmus and Vulgate texts, for a while it was very popular. Unfortunately it was recognisably derived from the Liesvelt Bible, and after Liesvelt's death it was placed on the list of forbidden books by the very Church authorities who had nurtured it. Nicolas Biestkens, a Baptist publisher in Emden, produced a Dutch reworking of the Zwingli Bible in 1560. This Biestkens Bible has been reissued at times, and still finds favour in some circles ("Baptist [*Doopsgezinde*], Lutheran and other religious minorities", I am informed) today.

All the Dutch Bible publications so far are encumbered by being derived in greater or lesser proportion from the Vulgate and German. To build directly on the rock of Greek and Hebrew had

not yet been accomplished, but had been tried. In 1556 Jan Utenhove translated a New Testament from a Greek text, but his idiosyncratic approach to the Dutch language meant that this promising attempt found little acceptance. So, it was back to revised editions of the Liesvelt Bible, still relying on the Luther German as a reference point, even to the extent of sharing the soubriquet *Deux aes* (*Two A's*) with German editions of the 1560s.⁸ Notwithstanding the rather free nature of the Luther Old Testament starting text, and the Brabant form of the underlying Dutch Liesvelt, this *Two A's* Bible of 1562 was the most used version in the Reformed Churches until the Statenvertaling. The need to take up the original languages as the ground-text was becoming pressing. English, French and Italian versions, notably those originating in Geneva (though often printed in Amsterdam-Antwerp), had already taken this step.

Marnix of Saint Aldegonde and Wernerus Helmichius

Lord Philip van Marnix of Sainte-Aldegonde, 1538-98, was very active both in the Reformation and in the revolt against Spain. He was a close friend of William I, the Silent,⁹ his representative at the first States-General Meeting of the United Provinces at Dort in 1572, and special envoy to the courts of England and France. More to our purpose, he produced a Metrical Psalter and parts of the Bible in Dutch. His criticism of the *Two A's*-Liesvelt Bible was as simple as it was swingeing—it is beyond repair, a whole new work in good Dutch from a good ground-text is needed.¹⁰

When Marnix died the work of Bible translation from Greek and Hebrew was taken on by Arnoldus Cornelisz and Wernerus Helmichius. Cornelisz died in 1605, and in 1607 Helmichius defended his work on the book of Genesis at the Synod of North-Holland. He was much distressed by the accusation that he was dragging his heels on the task. It is an irreducible problem, which readers of the QR have seen in Carey, Martyn and Judson: when the translator is also pastor and preacher, how does he set his priorities? Helmichius's work was painstakingly plain, and where there was no sufficiently clear Dutch word to represent the Hebrew meaning, explanation was given in the margin. This is now the seed of the Statenvertaling, but the work was beyond one man, and it was well known in The Netherlands that at just that time

Lord Philip van Marnix



fifty-four scholars in England were at work on a new Bible translation. More translators were needed, and direction from the national synod. Helmichius set to, but died in 1608. No single successor emerged, and because of other national difficulties it was ten years before the States-General of the United Netherlands called a national synod.

The Synod of Dort, 1618-19

The main business of this bench-mark synod was the problem facing the Dutch Reformed Church from those following the teaching of Jacobus Arminius, who had died in 1609. It was truly international, with representatives from most of the Protestant churches and nations in Europe.¹¹ Among representatives from England were John Davenant and Lancelot Andrewes; from Scotland, Samuël Ward and William Ames; from Geneva, Giovanni Diodati. The Canons of the Synod of Dort (sometimes Dordt or Dordrecht) have passed into the theological fabric of Protestantism in simplified form as the Five Points of Calvinism. We dare not linger now to discuss the issues, procedures and consequences. Ahead of the full gathering, from 19–27 November 1618, seven sessions were devoted to Bible translation questions. It was agreed that there was need of a new Bible translation, that fairly precise guidelines should be laid down for the accomplishment of that

work, and that thought be taken for the number of translators, their oversight and revision procedures.

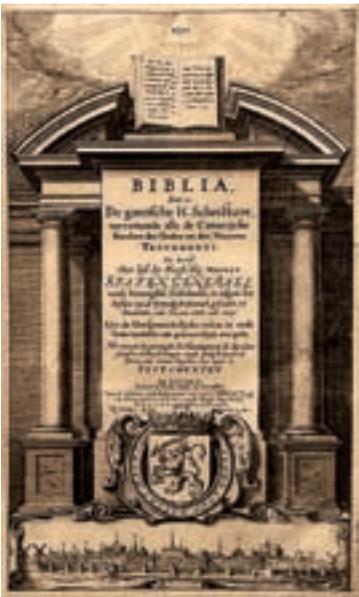
The Statenvertaling

Six translators were appointed to the work, three for the Old Testament and three for the New Testament and Apocrypha. There were two Frieslanders, two East Flemings, one Zeelander and one Hollander (the province, not the nation). Provision was made for these men in Leiden, with access to the necessary scholarly help and a good library. Their first task was to agree together, from the various Dutch dialects, on the orthography, grammar, vocabulary and usage for the language of the new Bible. Not only was this States-General Bible (*Statenvertaling*) rigorously close to the original Greek and Hebrew texts, it became the defining mould for what was to be ‘ordinary Dutch’, the ‘everyday language’ of the new-fledged nation.

Helmichius’s pattern of clarifying annotations in the margin was continued. Indeed, the States-General guidelines required it, along with references, book and chapter contents. The example of other worthy translations were to be used as a guide, and especially the most recent, the English Authorised Version of 1611. The need to coin words and phrases to come as close to the original as possible, so well begun in English by Tyndale, was accepted in Dutch, too, such as *ter elfder ure* (eleventh hour) at Matthew 20.9; *een steen des aanstoots* (a stumblingstone) at Romans 9.32, et al.; *op twee gedachten hinken* (halt ye between two opinions) at 1 Kings 18.21.

A special commemorative medal was issued for the Synod of Dort. This particular one belonged to Bishop Hall who attended the proceedings.





Title page of the Statenvertaling

Although the modern terminology of textual discussion was not at all in view in 17th-century Netherlands, the Statenvertaling can be described as unequivocally ‘formal equivalence’. Learning positively from the English, French and Italian labours of the previous one hundred years, and negatively from their own varied

Dutch-German recent history of translation, the Statenvertaling is rigorously close to the original languages. A principle seems to have been laid down almost unconsciously—the whole Bible carefully rendered from Greek and Hebrew is the only worthy transmission of the Word of God. If fidelity to Greek or Hebrew meant new words or awkward Dutch in the text of Scripture, so be it—what was the margin for if not to clarify such things! In modern terminology once more, the original language and not the receptor language takes ultimate precedence, a principle not always easy to communicate to those looking for ‘easy-read’ translations. At last, in 1637, at a time of fierce plague in Leiden, the Bible translation commissioned by the States-General, the Statenvertaling, was published.¹²

In their preface, the lords of the States-General describe the Scriptures as ‘the

original Text and Tongues, wherein it pleased the Lord God Almighty to reveal his Doctrine and Worship, through the inspiration of the Holy Ghost; to the end that the salvation of souls, and everlasting happiness, might thereby be furthered and advanced more and more’. They then assure us that ‘this translation being, through the Gracious Blessing of Almighty God, wholly furnished by the said eminent and expert men in the Hebrew and Greek Tongues, and yet further Revised by some other learned Divines; whose judgements and Approbations being declared unto us, that in this same Translation there was nothing omitted of what the Truth, the Propriety of the Words, and the Genuine sense thereof could require...’. They also refer to ‘The Original Fountains’, and during the years of preparation both the Elzevir 1624 Greek New Testament and that of 1633, with its prefatory declaration of a ‘textus...receptus’, became available; for Hebrew the Bomberg editions were already well established.

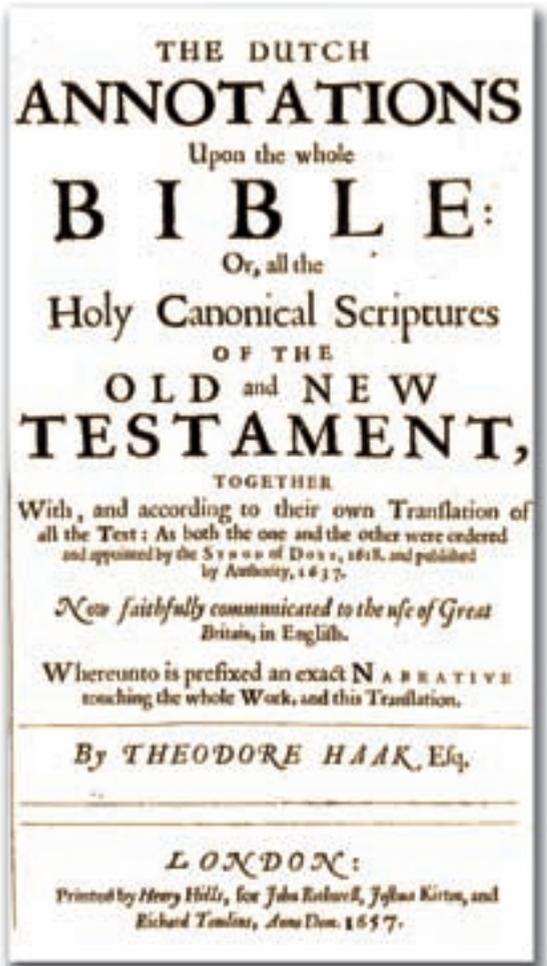
Theodore Haak and the English Statenvertaling (ESV!)

The Statenvertaling with its copious annotations was gladly received, not only in the Dutch churches but in other nations, too;¹³ and nowhere more enthusiastically than in the United Kingdom. English, Irish and Scots divines warmly recommended the Dutch (or *Belgick*) Bible and wrote notes to each other, expressing the wish that it might appear in the English tongue. The text, notes and references of the Statenvertaling were seen as such a tightly woven whole

that to reprint the notes without the text, or imposed upon another text, would lose the greater part of their usefulness. It was seen as a peculiarly blessed and integrated Bible translation, and if it were to be 'Englished' it were best to be done as a whole. The Westminster Assembly, 1643–8, was much enamoured of the Statenvertaling, and, in 1645, thirty-five signatories requested Oliver Cromwell to allow the Statenvertaling with its annotations to be translated into English. The recommendation to Parliament was not only that it be done into English, but specifically that it be so done by the learned gentleman Theodore Haak. And so it was.

Theodore Haak, 1605–90, was a German émigré from the Palatinate, and a remarkably busy scholar (he translated Milton's *Paradise Lost* into German), diplomat (special envoy to Denmark), and scientist (inextricably bound up in the beginnings of the Royal Society). He first fled to London at the outbreak of the Thirty Years War, and studied in Cambridge and Oxford. Initial progress on translation was slow, and in 1648 Haak was forced to start again using different methods. Diplomatic activities distracted him from the task in the early 1650s, but from May 1655 he worked solidly at the *Annotations*. Completion came in 1657, a reassuringly literal, word-for-word translation of the Dutch original.

So literal is the rendering that our colleagues of the Gereformeerde Bijbelstichting in Leerdam make occasional use of the Haak translation to gain another insight into the 17th century



usage of Dutch words. It was never republished in England, but it is now available again as a facsimile edition from the GBS, as a provision for the large numbers of English-speaking Dutch families in North America. I'm sure that it would find its way into many English homes as well! In addition, the GBS are now considering producing an edition of the Authorised Version with the Haak annotations. (For further information on these please contact the GBS

at Nijverheidstraat 21, 4143 HN Leerdam.)

In Closing

The Statenvertaling, or Statenbijbel, first published at Leiden in 1637, became the most widely-read book in the Dutch language. Every Protestant home had one; the day began and ended, and mealtimes were marked, with readings from this Bible and prayer. Wherever Dutch ships sailed or Dutch emigrants settled—North America, South Africa, East and West Indies—there went the Statenvertaling, the link with home and native tongue, the Word of God, able to make men wise unto salvation and to lead such into all truth.

The Synod of Dort had wanted to provide for the Dutch people just such a version, translated directly from the Hebrew and Greek originals by the most competent scholars. Their chief exemplar was that which English had acquired in the Authorised (King James) Version of 1611. Their prayerful expectations were realised. The new Bible eclipsed all earlier versions, and took centre stage in Dutch spiritual, ecclesiastical, linguistic and cultural history. It was, as we have seen, translated into English. I close as I began: in the Statenvertaling of 1637 (and Haak's 1657) we have the last great example of the classic Reformation vernacular Bibles, worthy peer of the English Authorised Version.

Endnotes:

1. However, I must confess that the large lorries of Dutch florists do seem to penetrate even the hinterland of rural Shropshire, almost daily! 'Tulipomania' was rampant in Holland in the 1630s.

2. William the Silent, the Sea Beggars, the

Relief of Leiden, endless English campaigning in the Low Countries, the death of Sir Philip Sidney at Zutphen (now twin town to Shrewsbury!), et al., all make for stirring reading!

3. A meld of High-German, Middle-French, and German. This text is one of the earliest sources of the Oudenederlandse (Old-Dutch) language.

4. The Dutch have a penchant for rhyming apothegms.

5. The First was once thought to be the Second, and vice versa.

6. Perhaps the name Erasmus comes to mind. It's where he started, though the Brethren, after de Groote's death in 1384, were subsumed into the Augustinian Order. À Kempis, 1380–1471, was of the order, and wrote a biography of de Groote.

7. Did he ever meet Tyndale there in Antwerp?

8. The name is because of an almost incommunicable wordplay in the Luther margin note at Nehemiah 3.5, which in Dutch became *Deux aes en heeft niet, six cinque en gheeft niet, quarter dry die helpen vrij*. In staid English the sense is 'The poor have nothing, the wealthy give nothing, those in the middle are open-handed'.

9. Marnix wrote the patriotic "Wilhelmus's Song".

10. Marnix on Luther raised my eyebrows—'Nothing is so far from the Hebrew truth as that of Luther, out of whose faulty High German translation our more faulty Dutch-German is come'. (My translation from a most useful Dutch source, *De Statenvertaling 1637-1937: De Erven F. Bohn NV 1937*, <http://www.statenvertaling.net/vdvlis1.html>, 26 May 2006.) Happily, the Luther edition has been improved over the years, and the edition of the German Bible published by the Society has been considerably revised.

11. Empty chairs were placed to represent the French Huguenots, who were prevented from attending.

12. Four of the six translators appointed in 1618 had died.

13. A parallel Russian-Dutch edition was sponsored by Tsar Peter after a stay in Holland.

THE GEREFORMEERDE BIJBELSTICHTING

40th Anniversary

1961

In The Netherlands 'The New Translation' (Nieuwe Vertaling) appeared in 1951, anticipating our New English Bible by ten years, but of similar character. The general acceptance of this version in church, family and school caused dismay and distress to many. Such concern became very sharp to Frieslander H. Kooistra at the time of his daughter's 18th birthday in 1961. She had asked for a pocket Bible. Not only could the largest bookshop in Zwolle not supply a Statenvertaling pocket Bible, but tried to dissuade such a quest.¹ Something must be done!

1963–1969

In 1963 a group of five Frieslanders sharing similar concerns were gathered with H. Kooistra at a farmhouse in Broeksterwoude. They formed themselves into a committee—'The National committee for the upholding of the Statenvertaling and the exposure of the Nieuwe Vertaling.'² They wrote many letters to seek support and in 1965 there was a first wider gathering at De Oude Tram, a restaurant near Amersfoort Station: a more formal management was formed, and Ds. J. van Haaren was Chairman from 1966 until his death in 1983. By 1969 the

aims had extended to Bible spreading in other languages, whereupon the new designation of the Society became 'The Reformed Bible Foundation for maintaining the Statenvertaling and for the distribution of Protestant and uncorrupted Bible publications': the Gereformeerde Bijbelstichting (GBS).³ As part of their objectives they state: 'The aim of the GBS is to preserve and to promote the use of the Statenvertaling Bible. In cooperation with the Trinitarian Bible Society in England faithful translations are distributed worldwide.'⁴

1970–2003

The previous two hundred years had seen the accumulation of many faults in the printed editions of the Statenvertaling, and the Gereformeerde Bijbelstichting was anxious to address this problem. Quite soon it was decided that to have an accurate edition of the Statenvertaling they must publish their own. This was to be strictly conformed to the 1657 Van Ravensteijn edition, that accepted by the Synod in its day. In 1973 there appeared the first GBS Bible, a Family Bible edition, and the first copy was presented to the widow of Ds. van Haaren. Soon there were many more editions, in all sizes, to suit church, family, school and hospital, as Kooistra had yearned for. But what about the margin notes (Kanttekeningen), which,

as seen in the main article, were such an integral part of the Statenvertaling? Further decisions were made and a work-group formed. It took fifteen years of painstaking labour to bring the Van Ravensteijn Kanttekeningen into modern spelling and page layout.

2004

On November 27 the first Bibles with the margin notes were distributed to various church representatives by GBS Chairman, Ds. P. Blok. Now this too is gone out into all the world, as the Society celebrates its 40th anniversary.

Today

Founded on similar principles, the GBS and TBS have had a close working relationship for many years. Both stand for the Divine inspiration and authority of the Holy Scriptures, and we share the desire to serve God by producing and circulating trustworthy translations of His Holy Word. It is through the GBS that the Statenvertaling continues to have wide circulation amongst Dutch-speaking peoples

around the world.

The GBS's generous financial and prayer support has enabled the TBS to pursue projects that otherwise might have been impossible. In the 1990s with their help we published our Hebrew Bible, and they are currently working with us on the distribution of the Arabic Bible and a setting of the Dutch/English diglot Bible, combining the Statenvertaling and the Authorised Version. In return, in the past ten years we have been able to provide some 600,000 Bibles for their distribution work in Eastern Europe.

We thank God for the Gereformeerde Bijbelstichting, and look forward to a long, prosperous association with them as together we seek to send out the Word of God among all nations.

Endnotes

1. He did obtain one directly from the publisher Jongbloed in Leeuwarden.
2. 'Landelijk comité tot behoud van de Statenvertaling en veroordeling van de Nieuwe Vertaling.'
3. 'Gereformeerde Bijbelstichting tot handhaving van de Statenvertaling en tot verspreiding van protestantse en onvervalste bijbeluitgeven.'
4. Translated from *Standvastig*, 40 (December 2005), 4:2
Information taken from J. de Koning, 'In Zwolle geen zakbijbel in Statenvertaling te koop', *Standvastig*, 41 (March 2006), 1:9.

The Treasury

We warmly thank the donors of the following anonymous gifts which have been received since the previous *Quarterly Record* went to press: Inverness £10; Sturminster Newton £20; Cheshire £3,000; Lancashire £10; Stornoway £100; Crowborough £100; Edinburgh £100; Kent £50; Brecon £100; Charities Aid Foundation £100.47, £128.21; Give as you Earn two of £100.47; Sharon Trust £200; church donation £50, two of £75; South West Charitable Giving three of £33.69; cash £10.50, £10; direct into the bank £100, £30, six of £25, £15; via Speakers £20; other £20, two of £5. **Total £4,786.19.**