A Key to Dutch History
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For Christians, the Bible is the most important book in existence because it contains the truth revealed by God, “the word of God”. One of the points of conflict during the Reformation had been the question of for whom the Bible was meant. The Catholic Church believed that the Bible should preferably not be read by ordinary people. Rather, they could listen to the explanations of the clergy in church, where the priests read from the Bible in Latin. The priests acted as intermediaries between God and the faithful.

The protestants, on the other hand, believed that the faithful themselves should be able to read the Bible and that the preacher in the first place was a servant of the word of God. It was the task of preachers to let God’s word speak to the congregation, through Bible readings and exegesis of the Scriptures. This meant, therefore, that the Bible should be available in the language of the faithful, preferably in as reliable a translation as possible. Consequently, the reformer Luther translated the Bible from the original texts into German in around 1535. In the sixteenth century, a number of Dutch translations were made of Luther’s German work.

Over the course of time, the call from the Dutch Reformed Church became ever stronger for a new translation based on the original manuscripts of the Bible in Hebrew and Greek. In 1618, the synod of the Dutch Reformed Church, during its main assembly in the city of Dordrecht, commissioned such a translation based on the example of the English Authorised Version (the King James Bible of 1611). The States General was asked to finance the translation.
The States General only agreed to this in 1626 and the translators were then able to start work. Nine years later the translation was completed, and in 1637 the Dutch authorised version, the Statenvertaling or Statenbijbel, was printed for the first time. Over 500,000 copies were printed between 1637 and 1657. The Statenbijbel remained the most important Bible in the Dutch Reformed Church for over three hundred years. Even today it is still used in some church communities. Currently, work is being done on a revised version of the Statenvertaling.

Over the course of time, through sermons and Bible readings, large groups of people became familiar with the language of the Statenbijbel, that also had an enormous impact on Dutch culture. The Statenvertaling was the source for expressions like “in the sweat of thy face” and “a feast for the eye”, that have now become embedded in the Dutch language.