

The Revision of the Mongolian New Testament

A. W. Marthinson

Mongolia is a country with a population of about four million people scattered over a very large area. At the time of Genghis Khan they were a mighty nation and people all over the world feared them. At the end of Kublai Khan's rule, in 1293, a Franciscan monk, Corvino, arrived in Peking, or, as it was called, Cambullic. This monk succeeded in his work amongst the people of the country and was later made Archbishop. Corvino seems to have learnt the language of the Tartars and translated the New Testament and Psalms into their language, probably Mongolian. In a letter written in 1306 he writes, "I have learnt the language of the Tartars and studied their literature. I have also translated the complete New Testament and Psalms". There is, however, no trace of this version.

It was not until 1819 that the Mongols had a couple of Gospels translated into literary Mongolian. Professor I. Schmidt, a German scholar, translated the Gospel of St. Matthew into Kalmuch, a Mongolian tribal language spoken in Chinese East Turkestan, sometime in 1815. Two Buriat Mongols with their home on the border of Siberia not far from Lake Baikal, saw a copy and were very much interested and a collection for funds to pay for the translation of a gospel or two into literary Mongol was started by a chief Lama and a prince, both Buriats. No less than £550 was sent to the Bible Society and two Buriat Mongols travelled all the way to Leningrad, at that time called St. Petersburg, to assist in the translation. During this work the two Mongols were converted. This edition of 1819 was, however, not much circulated.

Owing to the great interest amongst the Mongols in the Gospel, an appeal was sent by the Bible Society to the London Missionary Society for missionaries. The first missionaries to the Mongols arrived in 1817. For more than twenty years two or three of the missionaries were occupied with the translation of the complete Bible into literary Mongol. They worked under very difficult conditions and when the Old Testament was printed at the little Mission Press in Selinskogoll, or Selenginsk, in Northern Mongolia, they were driven out of the country and had to return to England. The work on the New Testament was completed in London in 1846. A tremendous task.

This translation by Rev. E. Stallybrass and Rev. W. Swan was a masterpiece for its time and has been used for about one hundred years. We have, however, felt in our work amongst the Mongols that a revision was very much needed. In 1935 it was decided that a careful revision should be undertaken. The complete New Testament was first translated from Chinese and this translation became the basis for further revision. The assistant Mongols had all mastered Chinese and some of them had studied for several years in China. Two of the most experienced Mongolian missionaries, Rev. Joel Eriksson and Miss Gerda Ollen,

then worked on the manuscript for several years. Owing to the war there were several interruptions, but the work went on. Early in 1951 a committee consisting of three Mongolian assistants and four foreign missionaries was set up and the manuscript was once more carefully checked. The first edition was ready in the Spring of 1953.

The Mongolian Script

The Literary Mongolian script was reduced to written form by three Mongol scholars at the time of Genghis Khan (A.D. 1162—1227) and has developed from Syriac. Syriac was brought to the Far East by the Nestorian missionaries in the sixth or seventh century. The three Mongolian scholars used Syriac as a basis and at first the script was written in horizontal lines; later on, however, it was changed to read from the top to the bottom of the line.

The Mongolian written language, which is quite different from the spoken, has an alphabet with thirty letters, written in vertical lines. Because many of the letters, while having the same appearance, have different sounds, it is not always possible to write the word according to its true sound. The written language is, as already mentioned, different from the spoken, and in spite of many attempts which have been made to adjust the two languages and make the written like the spoken, the Mongolian way of writing is at present much the same as it was centuries ago. This has, of course, been a great hindrance to the development of the cultural standard of the common people.

A Few Notes on the Revision

In the revision of the Mongolian New Testament one of the aims has been to use as simple language as possible. The first translators used a very high language. The Mongols are accustomed to many and high words when they translate their own so-called 'holy scriptures'. They believe that the higher the words, the more they will please their gods. It was, therefore, very difficult for the first translators to produce a more common language. Those revising the New Testament met, of course, with some of these difficulties too. Our assistants had, however, a very good knowledge of the language used in government schools and in offices and were able to give a more up to date translation.

In the final checking of the manuscript the Revised Standard Version of 1946 was followed with reference to Greek. Some of the Committee members had a limited knowledge of the original language, and this made it possible to take advantage of books like Young's Concordance and also 'Helps' prepared by the Bible Society. The translation was also checked with several modern English translations as well as with Swedish, Japanese, Chinese and Tibetan versions. We usually read every sentence several times and the first thing was to find out whether anything had been omitted. The Mongols love long sentences and it is the custom to have the verb at the very end. We often wished that St. Paul had written a little shorter sentences. Many a time one could be tempted to cut them in two, but this would not do, because the long sentences in our New Testament might just have been made for the

Mongols. Our assistants used to say, "We Mongols do love long sentences". It was, however, very important to tie the verb to the right subject. How many hours we spent on discussing these matters and what a joy it was when all finally agreed. Our Bible became so wonderfully rich, richer than we had ever known.

Terms for 'Baptism'

In the Stallybrass and Swan translation, the Greek word for 'baptism' was used and a new and non-Mongol word, *baptislacho*, was introduced. These and several other words or phrases became the so-called 'foreign words' of that version. The Mongols at the mission stations learnt, of course, the meaning, but not so the outsiders. Quite early another term was introduced in our work amongst the Mongols. It is the simple phrase *argon ochial*, which means 'holy washing'. The people in Mongolia are strictly religious and understand the meaning very well. They are familiar with the idea of water being used as a symbol of a new life and having received 'holy washing' means to have entered into a new sphere of life.

Terms for 'Cross'

The earlier translators, working in North Mongolia, amongst the Buriat tribe, adopted for 'Cross' a Buriat word, *jagolmeilchin*, a long and difficult word made up of twenty-two different letters. In the work of the missions another word was introduced and has ever since been used. It is the term *togonoltchi mott*, which is found in the top of a tent. The people on the steppes live in round felt-yurts and the round opening on the top of the tent serves as a window. The crosswood in that opening is called *togonoltchi mott*. 'Crucified' is translated 'nailed on the crosswood'. This term is very simple, but deep and interesting too. Light comes to men through the Cross. What a privilege to be able to proclaim such a message.

Terms for 'Love'

There has been not a little discussion regarding the right word for 'love'. In the earlier translation the word *jeniklel* was adopted and most of the Mongol Christians got used to this word. But for the outsiders it was a different matter. Amongst the Buriats in Northern Mongolia it could be applied when speaking of both divine and human love, but in the rest of Mongolia this term could only be used in connection with love between men, or sexual love. The phrase *jeniklel* is at present used only in poor or bad stories. There is, however, another word which has a wider and deeper meaning. It can be applied to both human and divine love. The word, *hajer*, has been used for many years in the little hymn 'Jesus loves me, this I know', and has been tested for a long time. That little hymn has been sung more than any other hymn and every Mongol understands the meaning.

Many other terms were, of course, discussed. Our only desire was to make the Word of God clear and understandable for the people

on the steppes. Our Lord and Master who had entrusted this difficult task to us enlightened our hearts again and again, and gave us wisdom and love for the work. It is true that Bible translation is a very difficult task, but it is also a most blessed task indeed. An endless amount of time was spent on such work under very simple and trying conditions, but what a joy when the manuscript was ready and turned over to the press.

Printing the Mongolian New Testament

The revision was completed—but how could it be printed? There were no types of any kind available. Attempts were made to secure some abroad, but nowhere was it to be found. It is one of the most difficult types in the world. There is, as already mentioned, an alphabet of thirty letters, but these are mostly different when written at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of a word; so we needed about a hundred different types to print the New Testament. At present there are very few printing firms able to print with Mongolian type, and all those are inside the Iron Curtain. Some of the type used by these firms is very much like handwriting and far from beautiful. Very little care is usually taken. It is of little importance if the backbone is straight or not. In our Revised Mongolian New Testament we wanted to have the very best obtainable. There was therefore nothing else but to have a set made and we decided to copy the Buriat type used in the 1880 edition of the New Testament, once printed at the Imperial Academy of Science Press in St. Petersburg. The print in that Book is an excellent piece of work, the likeness hardly to be found. All the different types fit very well together and the backbone of the words is absolutely straight.

This work proved to be a most difficult job, in spite of the fact that a most experienced Chinese type-carver was engaged and all the modern facilities of a large printing firm were available. All the hundred different types had to be straight wherever they were placed. The Chinese type-carver had done many difficult jobs, but here was something entirely different from what he was used to.

At last the type was ready. I had made ever so many trips to the press and tried to instruct him how we wanted to have the job done. There were, however, no Mongols available for the composing of the text. We therefore had to train a couple of young Chinese for the task. They had a few lessons on how to separate the written script from the printed and they were just to make something as like it as they could. Each type had a number and our Chinese learnt all these numbers without difficulty. They, as well as their fathers, had been working in that firm all their lives. Thousands of Chinese characters were well known to them, but the Mongolian script was far worse.

The first proofs were almost hopeless. However, we all did our utmost to correct and encourage the compositors, and after some days of hard work the first page was completed. Our Chinese friends were anxious to do their best, although they had no idea what they were doing. Gradually they all became more accustomed to the job. The proof-

reading was, indeed, difficult and sometimes we had to read the proofs as many as ten times. The New Testament was completed in April 1953 and our hearts were filled with joy and thanksgiving to the Lord who had so wonderfully blessed this work. Seventeen years had passed since this work began and much hard work had been done by both natives and foreigners. Ready at last, ready for the day when the doors of Mongolia shall swing open again. Until then quite a few copies are finding their way inside and we trust that hungry souls will find food and strength from the Revised Mongolian New Testament.

Two Important Swahili Translations

Lyndon Harries

The Union Version of the Swahili Bible, published by the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1952, is a major contribution to Christian life in East Africa. Earlier translations, especially the work of Bishop Steere in the Kiunguja dialect, set a very high standard of scholarship which has been consistently maintained. The Kimvita dialect is closer than Kiunguja to what might be called the classical tradition of Swahili speech, in the sense that it approximates more closely in its literate form to the type of Swahili employed by Muslim writers. The long tradition of Swahili literature, expressed in verse with Islamic themes, was centred in Lamu, north of Mombasa, and Kiunguja, the dialect of Zanzibar, was never the literary dialect. The general trend of modern Swahili literature, mostly sponsored by European agencies, has been away from the traditional manner, perhaps because of the strongly Islamic, and therefore Arabic, content of the latter. This has meant the predominance of the Kiunguja dialect in establishing modern standard Swahili. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Union Version reflects this predominance, though it is necessary to bear in mind that even the Kimvita employed by the Church Missionary Society for its earlier Bible translations was not identical in orthography or in lexical content with the Kimvita which Muslims themselves employed.

The fact is that in works published under European auspices, European influence is evident in both dialects. Although the differences between the dialects have been obvious, yet the common use of either dialect by Europeans in printed works had a standardising effect even before the Union Version was published. Compared with the dialectical variants confronting translators of Union Versions of the Bible in other languages, the differences between Kiunguja and Kimvita cannot be considered to be so great. This is not to detract from the achievement of the Union Version in Swahili, but to suggest that the real mark of cleavage has hitherto been between the literary forms accepted and promoted by European agencies, in either of the dialects, and those employed by Swahili writers exclusively Muslim.