THE BIBLE TRANSLATOR

QUARTERLY PUBLISHED BY THE UNITED BIBLE SOCIETIES

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VOL. 13, No. 4, OCTOBER 1962

OPPORTUNITIES IN THE FIELD OF BIBLE TRANSLATING

EUGENE A. NIDA

Ever since World War II an increasingly larger number of persons have become interested in and concerned for the field of Bible translating; the strategy of the printed page and the crucial necessity of wider distribution of the Scriptures have forced Christians to pay greater attention to the translation and revision of the Holy Scriptures. In our rapidly shrinking world, those with even a limited knowledge of the problems of communication on the mission field, have not failed to be impressed with the significant contribution which can be made by the relatively new emphases on structural linguistics and cultural anthropology. It is not surprising, therefore, that there are many inquiries from earnest young people who are desirous of having more information as to the opportunities for service, the necessary training, and the organizations which sponsor such endeavour throughout the world.

Fields of service

Although through the centuries the Scriptures, at least in part, have been translated into more than 1,100 languages, representing at least 95 percent of the world's population, there are, nevertheless, well over 1,000 mutually unintelligible languages and dialects which have nothing of the Bible and for which something of the Scriptures should be provided. It is quite true that many of these 1,000 groups represent relatively small tribes of only a few thousand people, but in some instances the population of these tribes is over 100,000. Tribes without any portion of the Bible are located primarily in Africa (where there are more than 300 languages without any Scriptures), in New Guinea and the nearby island world, and in Southeast Asia, especially Assam, Burma, Laos, and Vietnam. There are a number of other, though generally much smaller, tribes in such areas as Latin America, the Philippines and India.

It must be remembered, however, that though we may speak of over 1,100 languages as having received at least some part of the Scriptures, actually only 226 have entire Bibles and only 281 more the entire New Testament. This means that in terms of the total number of people involved and the number of churches to be served, there is even a greater need for providing these groups with more of the Scriptures than for producing the first part of the Bible in new languages.

Furthermore, in addition to all the pioneering work which remains to be done and the further translating into languages which now have something of the Bible but not enough, there exists perhaps an even larger task in preparing adequate revisions of the Scriptures in the scores of languages which now have even entire New Testaments or Bibles, but in which the Scriptures are quite unsatisfactory. In addition to the major languages of the world, in which in almost every instance there is some revision of the Bible now in process, there are fully 200 so-called "missionary translations" which need revision if the Christian community is adequately to be served by accurate and meaningful translations of God's Word.

In a very important sense, therefore the "fields of service" are really not geographical, though this is the way in which people tend to view such a ministry. Rather, they involve various types of work, ranging from pioneer translating for some primitive tribe which has nothing of the Bible, to scholarly revision for a Christian community with a long tradition of the Scriptures.

Types of service

In the same way as one finds certain significant distinctions in the fields of service, so there are important differences in the specific types of service, depending upon the needs of the particular situation.

A. In the first place, there is need for the pioneering linguist and Bible translator who goes to some tribe which has nothing of the Scriptures, reduces the language to writing, and produces the basic translation, together with such supplementary materials as primers, simple reading books and Bible stories.

B. The second type of service involves the individual who can either take on major responsibilities for further translation in one of the more "developed language" situations or who can head up important revision programs with the aid of relatively well-trained helpers.

C. A third type of service involves the well-trained person who with special preparation in the field of Biblical languages, theology, and linguistics can serve as a resource person for major revisions which are done by well-trained native speakers of the language. Such persons are usually particularly competent in the field of

textual research and exegesis, and can help to call to the attention of the editorial or consultative committees the scholarly resources which are available on special problems.

D. A fourth type of service involves linguistic and translation consultants who act as "trouble-shooters" because of their special qualifications in the fields of Biblical studies, linguistics, and anthropology. These are the persons who can go into various situations and provide the technical advice on a whole range of difficulties, from the formation of alphabets in primitive languages to the setting up of principles and procedures for scholarly revisions. Such individuals, rather than serving as continuing consultants on one or two major undertakings, are called upon to give advice on scores of linguistic and translational problems in a wide variety of languages.

These four types of service require various degrees and types of preparation, and represent in the first three instances distinct stages of development in translational situations, and in the fourth instance a special capacity to function as an advisor in all of the other three situations.

Personal prerequisites for the work

In order to be a truly successful Bible translator one must have a wide range of qualifications, including such capacities as sensitivity to style and an ability to laugh at one's own mistakes. The major qualifications for a Bible translator can, however, perhaps be best summarized as follows:

1. *Deep spiritual conviction* as to the relevance of the Biblical message, for only a personal commitment to and involvement in the message of the Scriptures can carry one trough the long and arduous process of language learning and translation.
2. *Good health,* especially for pioneering work, which must usually be carried out under relatively adverse living conditions. It is especially important that a person have good eyesight and hearing.
3. *Above average intelligence.* The nature of linguistic work makes it imperative that anyone who expects to dedicate a life-time to language learning and translation should have adequate mental equipment. Persons with I.Q's of less than 120 (regarded as a minimum for satisfactory work) should rarely be encouraged to do linguistic or translation work.
4. *Capacity to stick to the job.* There are certain intellectually challenging aspects of linguistic work, but there are also months of tedious effort, painstaking checking and double checking for accuracy, and endless proofreading. One who cannot be content to concentrate on this type of work should not regard it as a likely life task.

Necessary training

The training which is necessary for linguistic and translation work depends of course very largely upon the type of service. Moreover, one cannot be arbitrary about such training, by saying, for example, that college and seminary are obligatory, for it is quite true that some fine translating has been done by persons not having these backgrounds. On the other hand it must be recognized that by and large the best translating has been done by those who are the best trained for the work, and though religious devotion and personal enthusiasm can carry a person a long way, these are no substitutes for proper academic preparation. Actually, in the analysis of necessary training, it is more important to discuss the types of training that are required rather than the academic level which may have been attained in one or another field of study, though of course this is not an unimportant factor, as will be noted.

There are basically three areas of study in which the Bible translator should have some significant orientation: 1) Biblical studies, 2) linguistics, and 3) cultural anthropology.

Biblical studies

Biblical studies should of course focus attention upon the Biblical languages Greek and Hebrew, and the exegesis of the Scriptures. with some attention given to textual problems. For pioneering work it is very important that a person be able to make full use of lexicons and to appreciate commentaries which are written from the standpoint of the original languages. A good Bible training is a bare minimum for this type of work, and for the other types it is important that persons have seminary training or an equivalent.

Any individual wishing to serve as an adviser for a major revision (C), should, if at all possible, have some graduate work in Biblical languages, text, and exegesis, for the help which is needed by responsible committees undertaking major revisions is precisely the type of assistance which is only likely to be obtained from one who has gone considerably beyond the normal requirements for graduation from seminary.

While Biblical studies for the Bible translator should obviously focus on problems of language, text and exegesis, it is also important that one have some orientation to theology, missiology, and church history. Otherwise, even the best technical knowledge of the Biblical languages can be misleading, for the Bible cannot be fully understood or appreciated apart from the history of the witnessing community of believers.

Linguistics

Linguistics can be studied on a number of levels, from an introductory course in a Bible school or college to a doctorate in some

leading university.[1] In general, however, we may describe such courses as being of four types (or on four levels):

1. Introductory courses in various Bible schools and colleges. Many of these are useful orientations in the field of linguistics and should be taken by anyone even mildly interested in making linguistics a possible life work.
2. Courses of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. The Summer Institute of Linguistics (also known as the Wycliffe Bible Translators) operates a series of summer courses, three in the United States, one in England, one in Germany and another in Australia, in which missionary candidates are given an intensive instruction in basic techniques of reducing languages to writing and translating the Scriptures. The work is very practical, with important emphasis on acquiring necessary skills in reproducing and transcribing sounds, working out alphabets, and analyzing grammatical structures. There are advanced courses for those who have had an initial summer's work, and especially for those with some field experience. Even for students who wish to take graduate work in linguistics in some university, the Summer Institute of Linguistics offers a very practical introduction in basic skills.
3. Courses of the Kennedy School of Missions (Hartford Seminary Foundation, Hartford, Connecticut), which has a full academic program of linguistics, combined with emphasis on literacy and Christian literature. The program at the Kennedy School of Missions attempts to provide more of the theoretical background for linguistic work, while not overlooking the practical needs of missionaries, who must use linguistics as a tool for many phases of their program.
4. Courses in various Universities, e.g. Cornell and Yale Universities in America, the London School of African and Oriental Studies in England. More detailed advice on suitable courses of study will gladly be given on application to one of the Bible Society Translations Secretaries. For any individual who wishes to go very far in the field of linguistics, and especially anyone wishing to serve as a translation consultant (D), a Ph. D. in linguistics or its equivalent is almost obligatory.

Anthropology

Some background in anthropology is in some regards just as important as work in Biblical languages and linguistics, for words have no meanings apart from the culture in which they are used.

[1] A very useful book in helping one to understand something of the more technical problems of linguistics is *An Introduction to Descriptive Linguistics*, by H. A. Gleason, New York, Holt & Co., 1955.

Moreover, the most serious errors ever made by translators have resulted from their failure to understand the cultural anthropology of the people, not from misunderstanding of the Greek and Hebrew text.

In a number of schools one can obtain some introduction to cultural anthropology on an undergraduate level. If, however, such courses are not available, it is important to read extensively in this field. This may be done by following some important suggestions made by William A. Smalley in a special bibliography prepared on the subject of anthropology and missions and published by the Missionary Research Library (3041 Broadway, New York 27, New York). Further reading may also be done in *Practical Anthropology* (Box 307, Tarrytown, New York), an outstanding quarterly in the field of anthropology and Christian missions, and also edited by Dr. Smalley.

For persons interested in preparing themselves for service as a translation consultant (D), some graduate work in anthropology is essential, and for all others it is highly desirable.

The reason for emphasizing the trilogy of Biblical studies, linguistics, and anthropology is that obviously the Biblical message, as found in Greek and Hebrew, must be translated into languages with quite different structures and in the context of a quite different culture, which means that these three basic disciplines are all indispensable.

Sponsorship of translation work on the field

There are some missions, e.g. the Wycliffe Bible Translators, who concentrate primarily on pioneer translating (A), though they also train some persons to serve as linguistic specialists (D).

Most missions have a number of important languages in which there is some translating and revision work to be done. In general the so-called Faith Missions are most active in work of types A and B and the traditional denominational missions have their greatest commitments in work of types B and C.

The Faith Missions generally require Bible school, and some of them are quite anxious that their applicants have college and if possible seminary.

The denominational missions almost always require college, and generally insist on seminary or special graduate training in some field of specialization. It is most important that any person interested in the area of linguistic or translation work contact the personnel secretary of the board of his own church or of the mission in which he has become especially interested, in order to learn about the specific opportunities and the particular requirements for the task.

Bible Society translation consultants

The Translations Secretaries of the major Bible Societies have for many years maintained close contact as far as possible with translators on the field, and have from time to time made tours in various regions in order to discuss the work and problems of translators. Gradually it has been felt that it was desirable in some areas to have someone permanently in the field in order to give guidance over an extended period in all kinds of problems which may confront the translator, but especially the problems specially relevant to a particular area; for example, matters of language analysis and orthography will be prominent in regions where there is much pioneer work in progress, more exegetical and translational questions where a number of national translators are at work. For some time there has been a special translations adviser in India, and in recent years translation consultants have also been situated in Latin America, Africa and the Philippines; it is hoped to increase their number as suitable personnel become available. [2]

The work of the translation consultant is, of course, diverse, and varies somewhat from area to area. However, a major part of his time will be devoted to personal contact and correspondence with the translators in his area, supplying information which they need, seeking solutions to their problems, and in general helping and encouraging in the work of translation and preparation of the manuscript. In all these matters he will work in close cooperation with his home Translations Department, and serve as liaison officer between the Department and the translator. Often he will also be responsible for organising and conducting conferences for translators in his area, as well as representing the cause of translation in general in missionary and church conferences. Finally, it will be an important part of his task to do research on special cultural and linguistic problems bearing on translation, publishing his results in appropriate technical journals.

It is obvious that for this task, a translation consultant needs a high level of training in all the three basic areas of study already mentioned, Biblical studies, linguistics and cultural anthropology, though he will not necessarily be a specialist in all three. He will also need to have practical experience in the field, preferably having himself worked for a period as a translator or member of a translation committee, although it may be possible for someone with the necessary qualifications to obtain practical experience by being apprenticed for a time to a translation consultant in the field. Besides academic training and experience, many other capacities are needed for the work, especi-

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[2] Since this article was written, another translation consultant has gone to Thailand, with the intention of serving the area of South-East Asia. Ed.

ally as one will often have to exercise a large measure of independence. [3]

Range of opportunity

Thus anyone interested in Bible translating and in closely related fields of service, e.g. literacy and Christian literature, there is a wide variety of openings requiring different types of ability and a wide range of special capacities. Anyone who is thinking of dedicating a life-time to this kind of work should certainly obtain the very best preparation which it is possible to acquire. Even a primitive tribe deserves the best that a missionary is able to give, and of course as one obtains more training and greater skill there are rapidly widening areas in which one can make a more and more significant contribution to the total task of the church. The old adage that "there is plenty of room at the top" holds equally true in Christian service; the better the preparation, the greater is the area of strategic service.

NEW SCROLL OF THE PSALMS DISCOVERED

ROBERT P. MARKHAM

A Hebrew scroll dating from the middle of the first century A.D. was recently unrolled in Jerusalem. It was found in 1956 in one of the caves near the north end of the Dead Sea but its contents were only recently made known. It is about fourteen feet long and contains thirty-six of the canonical Psalms, as well as more than forty other Psalms. Among them is the Hebrew text of Psalm 151, known heretofore only in Greek, Latin and Syriac, but not in Hebrew. The scroll is to be edited and published under the direction of Dr. James Sanders, Visiting Professor at the American Schools of Oriental Research, Jerusalem.

The Psalms are not in the traditional "Biblical order"; some of the hitherto unknown Psalms may have been written by and for the use of the Essenes, a sect which flourished in the time of Christ but is not actually mentioned in the Bible.

A cursory check of Psalm 119 by Dr. Sanders showed that it was copied in the usual alphabetic acrostic arrangement familiar to us from the later printed Bibles. The Hebrew text of the Psalm is almost verbally in agreement with the Massoretic text.

An extensive "Preliminary Report" on the new scroll may be found in the *Bulletin of the Jerusalem School of Oriental Research,* Number 165 (February 1962), pages 11-15.

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[3] A fuller account of the function of Bible Society translation consultants will be found in an article entitled "Linguistic and Translation Consultants" by E. A. Nida in the *Bulletin* of the United Bible Societies, 3rd Quarter 1962, pp. 99-103.