

BIBLE TRANSLATION IN THE LUSHAI HILLS

F. J. RAPER

The Lushai Bible, published by the Bible Society of India and Ceylon in 1959, is the twenty-fifth complete Bible to be issued in the languages of India, Pakistan and Ceylon. The Lushai Hills, a district situated on the eastern frontier of India with Burma has during the past seventy years witnessed one of the most remarkable community movements towards Christianity in the modern world. The first missionaries found themselves among a people dispirited by defeat. Poverty had driven them to make raids on neighbouring tribes and the British Government had recently pacified the area by force of arms and taken over the administration of the hills. After some years of seemingly fruitless labour, a revival broke out which brought many thousands into the Church, and the revival was spread by Lushai Christians, so that to-day almost the whole population of the hills is at least nominally Christian.

W. J. Culshaw

The translation of the Bible into the Lushai language was completed about June 30th, 1955. It was started by Rev. J. H. Lorrain in the year 1895 when he and Rev. F. W. Savidge had been in the country about two years. Here is Mr. Lorrain's own account of it.

First beginnings

"We had picked up a certain amount of the language before actually getting into the country, especially from the books which had been written by two Government officials who had been in contact with the people during the punitive expeditions following headhunting raids. It fell to our lot, however, to reduce the language to a system which could be used by the Lushais themselves, for they had no characters of their own, nor any idea how to convey words and thoughts in writing. We used Roman characters such as we use in English, and were able to follow more or less the system known in India as the 'Hunterian' system. This is practically phonetic, every word being spelt exactly as it is pronounced.

"The Lushais at first would not attempt to learn to read and write their own language. They declared they were 'monkeys' and quite incapable of mastering such a mysterious art. But after a time we persuaded a few young men to try and, to their delight and ours, they proved to be intelligent pupils. They not only learned themselves, but taught others, and before long quite a number had mastered the rudiments and were clamouring for 'something to read'.

The translation of the New Testament

"We began the translation of the Scriptures in August 1895, when we had been in the country nearly two years. We commenced with Luke, Acts and John, taking them in that order. These three portions took us two years of continuous hard work, in which we were greatly helped by Suaka and Thangphuga, the first two Lushais who learned from us the art of reading and writing. We commenced with Luke because we thought it would be the easiest of the three books mentioned above. We left John until last because we thought it would be the most difficult. In this we were greatly mistaken, for we discovered that all the writings of John, his Gospel, Epistles and his Revelation, have a simplicity and beauty of diction when rendered in the Lushai language which is quite remarkable.

"Luke, Acts and John were published in 1898 by the British and Foreign Bible Society, the first Scripture portions ever printed in the Lushai language. Since then, through the years, the whole of the New Testament followed portion by portion. But it was not until December 1922 (twenty-seven years from the time when the translation of Luke was commenced), that the New Testament was completed and bound in one volume with consecutive paging, the whole thoroughly revised. This revision alone occupied five years of almost constant labour.

"In 1928 the New Testament was followed by Psalms and Genesis, and in 1932 by Isaiah."

It must be added that throughout all this time Rev. J. H. Lorrain was compiling his grammar of the Lushai language and also collecting the material for his dictionary which was finally published by the Asiatic Society in 1940.

Interruption and resumption

Mr. Lorrain retired from the mission field in 1932, his colleague Mr. Savidge having done so some years previously, and with his going, work on the translation of the Bible was suspended. For one thing the new missionaries had not sufficient knowledge of the language nor the experience to enable them to follow on immediately, and it was also necessary at that time to curtail expenditure owing to lack of funds. The Lushai translation workers were either pensioned off or given other work to do.

It soon became clear that we were wrong to neglect this vital part of missionary work and, as soon as we felt able to tackle the work, the matter was taken up with our Baptist Missionary Society in 1936. As a result, in 1937, two Lushai brethren were set apart to work with the missionaries, and the translation of the Bible was begun again in earnest. These two men were Rev. Challiana and Rev. Chuatera, both of outstanding Christian character and experience. Both had accompanied Mr. Savidge to England on one

of his furloughs and have a good knowledge of English, Both have great experience as pastors and teachers in the Bible School. Moreover, they had both had many years of association with the missionaries in translation work, including translation of the Bible. These were later joined by Rev. Zathanga, also a man who had had considerable experience in Bible translation with Mr. Lorrain from the beginning of the work.

Revision of the New Testament

No sooner had we started than the Bible Society wrote to say that they were contemplating printing a new edition of the Lushai New Testament and gave us an opportunity of revising it if we wished to do so. The Lushai Christians have always been keen readers and students of the Bible, and have not been slow to offer criticisms and suggestions according to their knowledge and their growing understanding of Christian doctrine. We therefore invited all who wished to do so to send in their suggestions for revision of the text of the Lushai New Testament, and an imposing list was prepared covering many sheets of foolscap paper. A Revision Committee of three missionaries and three Lushai men was agreed upon and each was asked to go through the list. It was decided that we should only send forward suggestions upon which all six were agreed.

After many months of work it was finally discovered that the suggestions upon which all six were agreed were few and not of vital importance. This was a remarkable tribute to the work done by Mr. Lorrain and his helpers in the first place. However, the opportunity was taken to revise the spelling and bring it into line with the rules most recently adopted for the written Lushai language. In this way we were once again able to set the highest standard in every way in the new edition of the Lushai New Testament.

The printing of a new edition of the Scriptures entails a lot of careful work in the reading of the proofs. This work fell to us to do and it had to be done by post. As the post takes at least ten days either way, and as each proof has to be read at least twice, and often three times, the work was spread over a long period.

The Bible completed by joint effort

Up to this time Bible translation had been done by missionaries of the B.M.S. and others in the South Lushai Hills, but now by mutual arrangement missionaries of the Welsh Mission in the North Lushai Hills, along with their Lushai helpers, began to share in the work.

The rate of progress, however, was always dependent on the amount of time the missionaries were able to give to translation work along with their Lushai helpers. Owing to the small number of missionaries and the many and varied calls on our time by a

fast growing Church and Christian Community we were never able to give as much time to Bible translation as we should have liked. The continuity of the work was continually held up by furloughs as well as by the war. However, by June 1955 the work was completed. The translating of the Lushai Bible had covered a period of sixty years.

It must not be thought that the Lushai Christians had no knowledge of the Old Testament. Since the early days the Church has been well served with a translation of a book called 'The Story of the Bible', which gave the content of the Old Testament in simple and readable form and which ran into many editions. That book along with the Lushai New Testament has enabled our people to become real Bible Christians. The systematic teaching of the Bible in Sunday Schools made it necessary to come to special terms with the India Sunday School Union because so many of our scholars qualify each year for prizes in the annual Scripture examination.

Our Bible school for lay workers has been in existence for about twelve years and until now it has been necessary to teach from a typed MS of some of the Old Testament books.

Revision needed

Those who have been engaged in the work of translating the Bible into the Lushai language believe that the Holy Spirit has been their guide throughout the work, and that the translation will be for the building up of the Church of Christ in these hills.

However, in the light of fuller knowledge of the Lushai language and of its continual development, as well as the increasing understanding of the Christian faith by the Lushai Christians over the sixty years, no one is more conscious of the need for revision than those who took part in the original translation.

The work of revision began right away after the first translation was finished. The same Lushai brethren who have spent most of their lives working with the missionaries in translating the Bible are now engaged in the revision. It was hoped that they would be joined by a young graduate of Serampore College, but his services are required by the Church in other capacities for the present.

It will be some years before the Revision is completed and printed, meanwhile we welcome the first edition of the whole Bible in Lushai to be made available, and thank God for all who have given themselves to the work.
