

# The Revision of the Cebuano New Testament

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Cebuano is one of the major Philippine dialects, the native dialect of more than four million Filipinos in central Visayas and northern Mindanao. It is understood by a great number of Filipinos of the minor dialect groups in the rest of the Visayas and Mindanao as well.

The work of translating the Scriptures into Cebuano began shortly after the arrival of Protestant missionaries in the Philippines early in this century. The New Testament was completed in 1908, and the entire Bible became available in Cebuano in 1917. The present version of the Cebuano Bible is a second revision published in 1937.

## The Need for Revision

The need for revising the present version of the Cebuano Bible was felt soon after its appearance in 1937. Christian leaders in the Visayas who were familiar with the English Bible had expected a general revision of the 1925 version. As it turned out, the 1937 version proved to be a very slight modification of the previous one.

The chief criticism of the present Cebuano Bible is that it is hard to understand. This is due to the fact that it is generally a very literal translation. As a result, the syntax is felt to be unnatural in many places, and some of the idiomatic expressions in the original text convey different meanings, a few of which are absurd or ridiculous. Ambiguities abound because of the tendency to use general terms rather than more specific words. In some instances, where the emphasis is misplaced, words have become obsolete, or there were mistranslations in earlier versions, no correction had been made.

The plan to revise the 1937 version of the Cebuano Bible took definite shape in 1952 when Dr. Eugene A. Nida sounded out the opinion of some Philippine Protestant church leaders on the need of revising this version and engaged this writer to undertake the basic work. Actual work, however, did not begin until April 1953, when I started revising the Cebuano Gospel of Matthew. About this time, a representative group was formed to study and approve some principles and procedures to be followed. This group was composed of a dozen men who were leaders of various denominations operating in the Visayas and Mindanao. Copies of the basic revision of the Cebuano Gospel of Matthew were sent to them for study. Discussion and approval were to come at a later meeting.

In July of that year, four months after I had started work, the Rev. G. Henry Waterman came to the Philippines as the American Bible Society Translations Consultant to supervise all the Bible revision work going on in the country. Under his guidance, the group that met shortly after in Cebu City approved the translation principles and procedures to be observed in the revision work. It also discussed and approved a few

chapters of Matthew which it was able to cover at that meeting. From this big group, five members were chosen to compose the regular Cebuano Revision Committee, which was to meet for at least four days each month.

The basic revision work which started in April 1953 was completed in July 1955. The committee met for the last time to finish its work in November 1955. The revised New Testament in Cebuano is in the process of being printed and will come off the press this year.

In the actual work of revising the Cebuano New Testament, in accordance with the translation principles approved by the group, the aim was to produce a Bible version that is faithful to the original text and at the same time phrased in natural Cebuano. The work began and continued to the end with this aim always in view.

### Early Stages of Revision

Before the work began, translation helps *had to be secured*. Especially valuable were the English versions of the Bible, of which there were a dozen, commentaries, a Greek lexicon, and Bible dictionaries. Translation helps had also been secured in the form of the various Philippine versions of the Bible and from articles published in *The Bible Translator*.

As the revision of the Gospel of Matthew started, the plan was to make changes right on the printed pages of the book. Each page was pasted on a sheet of bond paper of standard size, thus securing wide side and bottom margins on which the proposed changes could be written. From these corrected pages copies were made for checking against the Greek text by the consultant and for study and discussion by the revision committee.

Even before the first chapter of Matthew had been done it became evident that the revision was not going to be a slight one. The changes were so extensive that more written matter appeared on the margins than remained untouched in the printed text. After four chapters of Matthew had been done in this way, it was decided to change the procedure and to type out the proposed revision of the text instead.

### Revision Procedure

As draft translator, I read a given passage from the English versions to determine the correct meaning as accurately as possible. For this phase of the work, other helps, such as commentaries, Bible dictionaries, and Greek lexicons, were consulted. Then the present Cebuano version of the New Testament was studied. When a passage in this version proved to be a good rendering, it was copied word for word. Otherwise a proposed revision was made. Next, clean copies of the proposed new version were made, and the entire translation was subjected to further review as it was being typed.

This translation was then checked for faithfulness to the Greek text. This phase of the work called for my reading back to Mr. Waterman, the Translations Consultant, a literal English translation of many of the revised passages. Every word, according to its part, function, and order in the sentence, was translated into English. In this way Mr. Waterman

could determine the quality of the rendering and thus give valuable suggestions for its improvement.

Copies of the checked translation were then made and sent to committee members for home study and discussion at meetings. The committee held all of its meetings at Cebu City, except on two occasions, when it met once at Dumaguete City on Negros Island and once at Oroquieta, the capital town of Misamis Occidental on the island of Mindanao. At these meetings the proposed revision was discussed from all angles: orthography, exegesis, syntax, etc. The members of the committee, all of them church leaders and ordained ministers, made valuable contributions to the work of revising the Cebuano New Testament.

### **Influence of the Revision**

The biggest change resulting from the revision is in the syntactic style. In accordance with the translation principles followed, the new revision has been rendered in the natural style used by all writers in magazines and periodicals in Cebuano.

The new Cebuano version is now used as a basis in the revision of the New Testament in other Philippine dialects now going on in the country, particularly in Samareño and Bicol. Translations of the newly revised New Testament are being made into these dialects by the draft translators who also know Cebuano. The resultant translations have been accepted enthusiastically by their respective committees.

Even before the publication of the newly revised New Testament in Cebuano, three of its books had been published separately and distributed widely. Reports coming from the field are favorable on the whole, and general approval of the new revision, resulting in wider distribution of it, can reasonably be expected.

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## **The Art of Translation**

*Robert G. Bratcher*

"Every modern translation is an interpretation of the original work."<sup>1</sup> As the grandson of Ben Sirach confessed: "Things spoken in Hebrew have not the same force in them when they are translated into another tongue." To both these statements all translators would give their assent.

In the book at hand, *A Arte de Traduzir* (2nd ed.: S. Paulo: Edições Melhoramentos, n.d.), the Brazilian writer and essayist Brenno Silveira has made some acute observations on the art of translating. With more than twenty years' experience of translating into Portuguese works written in English, Spanish, Italian, and French, the author is obviously well-qualified to write on the subject. This is not, however, a complete

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<sup>1</sup> W. Schwarz, *Principles and Problems of Biblical Translation*, p. 1.