

placing one's confidence or trust in". The native naturally thinks in terms of his own background, which is one with all non-Christians the world over. He thinks in terms of coming into agreement with those things which God expects of him. He has never before heard of God's doing something for him which he could never do for himself. The native exhibits unabashedly the natural reaction of man in his futile attempt to do something to enjoy the favor of the supernatural. The uniqueness of the gospel lies in its glad tidings of God's having done that great "something" in Christ on behalf of sinful man, to which all men are commanded to reorientate themselves (to repent) and in which all are invited to trust with perfect confidence and hope for both time and eternity. Unless the term we use to translate the concept "to believe in" has something of the quality of "to trust in" as well as "intellectually to assent to as being valid", we are failing at a crucial point in presenting the gospel. It would be well if all missionaries and especially the translators would reexamine the present translations of this basic concept to see if they have missed this most fundamental aspect in presenting the uniqueness of the Christian gospel.

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## Translating the Word of God<sup>1</sup>

*Pham Xuan Tin*

All Protestant missionaries recognize the great importance of translating the Bible into the language of the people to whom they desire to preach the gospel. The Bible does not merely enrich their literature and help them to speak their own language more correctly, but it is also the means God can use to bring them salvation and then build them up in the most holy faith.

I would not dare to pose as a person who knows how to translate the Bible perfectly; but after fourteen years' experience in learning languages and relying upon the Lord's grace and power as I have translated the Scriptures, I have learned that there are many hard things encountered in this work. I thought I would enumerate some of them, trusting that they will prove to be of value to those already engaged in seeking to win the lost or to those whom the Lord may call into His whitened harvest field as translators of the Word.

### **A Shortage of Words Is Not Unusual**

One difficulty encountered in translating the Bible into the languages of the tribes people of Indo-China is that they lack so many words. Not only do these tribes lack words to translate the Scriptures correctly according to the original, but they also lack many ordinary words. What is a missionary to do in such cases? He will be obliged to borrow words either from a nearby tribe, from some tribe closely associated with them,

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<sup>1</sup> The article was translated from Vietnamese by Rev. H. H. Hazlett.

or from his own mother tongue. Or he may have to paraphrase the original text of the Bible. Even then, when he preaches he will have to use visual aids to explain the word he has translated. For example, the tribes people have no word for "camel". When I came to Mark 1 : 6, "And John was clothed with camel's hair", I had to use the Vietnamese word for "camel" *lac-da*, adding their word for "horse" *aseh*, so that they would understand that a camel was a beast of burden. I felt free to do this because the Bahnar people borrow such Vietnamese words. With reference to the various precious stones mentioned in Revelation, I could do nothing more than translate according to their respective colors.

When it comes to doctrinal matters, the task is still more difficult, for these people have never heard of "holiness", "righteousness", "truth", or the "new birth". They have never made any distinction between "soul" and "spirit" and do not know what a "conscience" is. During their whole lifetime they have never heard such words as "prophet", "pastor", "evangelist", "apostle", "elder", or even more ordinary terms, such as "future" and "although". The missionary can only stand amazed in situations such as these. He is like a clever cook wishing to bake bread, who finds himself out of flour. He must not be like the person who wished to cook but found no rice and hence decided to fold his arms and give up. If a missionary decides to give up translating the Word of God because of this lack of adequate terms, he has made a grave mistake. When all other methods fail, he can always use some word which is the nearest in meaning to the word used in the original or group two or three synonyms together to make a more forceful rendering of a certain verse.

### **Grammatical Difficulties**

A Bible translator not only encounters difficulties in terminology, but he also finds that certain grammatical constructions do not exist. In Vietnamese we can say, "A tiger ate a dog". But we can also say, "A dog was eaten by a tiger". The tribes people, however, have no passive form of the verb and are obliged to use the active form constantly. For example, in John 19 : 20, "where Jesus was crucified" had to be translated "where they crucified Jesus".

### **The Use of Trade Languages**

A missionary must be very careful in his choice of a language to use in Bible translation. Since each village and each group of villages may have a different language, he will have to choose one which is most nearly common to all of them before he begins to translate the Bible. For example, in Pleiku we have the Hodrung tribe, at Pleikli the Jorai, and other Jorai people live in Cheoreo. In Cu-Ti there are the Puang tribes people. The Hodrung have many words which differ greatly from those used by the Jorai at Cheoreo, and the Puang language is entirely different from that of the Jorai at Pleikli. When a missionary preaches to these people, he can use words from all these languages if there are people present who understand them. But he could not translate the Bible in that manner. So I had to give much attention to this important matter

and choose the one language among the four which was common (like a trade language) to all of them. After considerable study I decided to use the Jorai spoken at Cheoreo for the translation of the Bible.

### **Avoiding Hasty Translations**

It is good to have an ardent desire to translate God's Word as soon as possible, and yet a missionary should not try to translate it too soon. Let me relate my sad experience along this line. When I learned Jorai, I had a school teacher for a private tutor, who could tell me the words I wanted to know because he spoke French. But when I engaged a Bahnar Christian who knew a little Jorai to teach me Bahnar, I found it very difficult to learn that language. One day I asked him in Jorai how to say "believe" in Bahnar, and he gave me the word *kua*. I used this word in translating the chorus "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ". Later I asked another Bahnar who understood Jorai better, and he informed me that *kua* meant "don't want" or "won't". I certainly was sorry that I had been using that word in the chorus for some time, but it was fortunate that I had only used it in a short chorus which had not been printed. After this experience I decided to ask at least ten people how to say every new word before using it. For this reason, when I hear that a missionary who has only studied a language for a year or two has begun Bible translation work I am not very happy and I fear he will not be very successful.

### **Searching for Words**

Missionaries must also be careful not to decide arbitrarily that equivalents for certain words do not exist. When they have a hard portion to translate, they must search and ask questions constantly until they find the right words. I have found that young tribes people will often tell me a word does not exist just because they do not know it. Again one person may know a word which another one has never heard. In translating the Book of Revelation I needed the word for "palm branches" (7:9). I asked many Jorai but they all said they did not know this word. When I was revising the translation of this book, I found that one of my student preachers did not know the word either. I asked all the Bible School students and student preachers, more than twenty-five persons altogether, but none of them knew the word, even though I showed them a picture of a palm tree. When I asked some Jorai school teachers, they mentioned several trees and plants, even pineapple and grapevine. I was discouraged, but I did not give up. I asked all the secretaries in the government official's office, but none of them knew it either. They were tired of answering my questions. All the younger men said they had not seen the tree or did not know the word, but an older secretary who had been stationed in Cheoreo, Pleikli, and other places promised to find the word for me. One morning as I was supervising the construction of our new chapel, he brought me the word I needed. He said that because of the infrequent use of some words many people had forgotten them, especially children and young people. The following day I asked all of my students if they knew this word and they all said they did and that it was the right word to use.

## Versions Which Should Be Used

The Bible Societies prefer that translators use the original languages of the Bible, Hebrew and Greek, as bases for translations. But, unfortunately, none of us Vietnamese preachers has had the opportunity to study these languages. Nevertheless, with the Lord's help, we can compare various English, French, and Vietnamese versions and use them. Modern English versions of the New Testament are especially helpful.

I recall that when I wanted to translate Matthew 1 : 2, "Abraham begat Isaac", I was greatly troubled. The Vietnamese Bible uses the word *sanh* "gave birth to", the French Louis Segond Version has *engendra*, and the American Standard Version (1901) has *begat*. If I followed the Vietnamese, the Jorai would think that Abraham was a woman. Fortunately, I looked in the Synodale French Version and found *fut le père de* "was the father of", which was exactly what I wanted.

Since tribes people are not very expert at reading, they read very slowly. Hence Scripture portions and Bibles have to be printed carefully and ample spaces left between the lines. It is also helpful to have paragraph headings. I found Weymouth's New Testament useful in dividing the chapters into paragraphs and in preparing these headings.<sup>1</sup> I am thankful to the Lord for helping me to complete the translation of Genesis, "The Way of Salvation" (a tract), "God Hath Spoken" (selected Bible verses) and the entire New Testament in Jorai, with the exception of 1 and 2 Corinthians and Hebrews. We are grateful to the Lord and to the British and Foreign Bible Society for printing 5,000 copies each of the Gospels of Mark and John. We have also requested the Scripture Gift Mission to print "The Way of Salvation" and "God Hath Spoken".

Our Bible School students and student preachers are very diligent in selling Scripture portions all over the province of Pleiku. One government employee bought fifty copies to distribute to his relatives, and a student bought twenty copies to give away to members of his family. Many Jorai students are denying themselves candy so they can buy Gospel portions. We are exceedingly grateful to the Lord for His goodness in preserving the manuscript of the Gospel of Mark when I had to flee into the jungle during World War II, where I carried it with me constantly. The British and Foreign Bible Society is also printing the Gospels of Matthew and Luke and the book of the Acts in Jorai, and the Gospel of Mark in Bahnar. We use a mimeograph machine to print the various Epistles and the Book of the Revelation and various tracts explaining the Bible.

We would ask Christians everywhere to pray that the Seed may fall into good ground and bring forth much fruit for His glory.

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<sup>1</sup> The American Bible Society has prepared in mimeograph form suggested section headings for the entire Bible. - Ed.