

Some Experiences in the Translation of Genesis and Exodus into Lingala

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It is passing strange that my name should be associated with Bible translation. Such a task is, in Europe and America, strictly the province of highly trained scholars, men who are specialists in the Biblical languages. But the fact remains that many translations which have met with wide acceptance and have rendered valuable service have been made by people of modest scholastic attainments. How can this be? The answer lies in the helps that lie at the disposal of the missionary translator.

The standard reference books often enable one to arrive at a good estimate of the original meanings. Books that have proved indispensable in my work are a Bible Encyclopedia, the commentaries that give some space to exegesis, a concordance and Hebrew and Greek dictionaries. The latter have been used with caution because of the consciousness of the danger of a little knowledge. It becomes astonishingly clear, when in translating one must be precise, how easily one has slid over such familiar terms of the King James Version as 'shewbread', 'ephod', 'breastplate', 'witch' and a host of others without really understanding them. It is easy to mistake familiarity for comprehension.

A number of versions have been of great help to me. They often clarify meanings, and they are useful in pointing up textual and exegetical problems. When the various versions do not agree there is usually a problem of such a nature underlying the discrepancy. I have at hand six translations in English, two in French, one in Swedish and one in Norwegian. I also have one in an African language related to Lingala with which I am familiar. I have Bibles in three other Bantu languages which I cannot read, but which are of value in the rendering of proper names and sometimes in the rendering of words foreign to Africa.

The first draft, made on the basis of these helps, is examined together with some African Christians with whom I can discuss the passages that are more difficult to render, and who occasionally pick up errors or inferior expressions which were overlooked in the first instance.

It has been my privilege to have a colleague in this task who is familiar with several Bantu languages and who has a better knowledge of the Biblical languages than I do. In spite of a full time job, Dr. John F. Carrington has given himself unstintingly to a careful examination of my manuscripts. When we have finished with it, copies of the completed book are made for distribution to representative people who will examine it in various parts of Lingala-speaking Congo.

The problems with which we have been faced may generally be classified under one of three heads:

1. Problems arising from the inadequacy of the language into which we are translating.
2. Problems arising from differences within the language as used in various areas.
3. Problems arising from some obscurity in the text or one's understanding of it.

I. Problems arising from the inadequacy of the language are mainly the names of animals, plants, or other things which do not exist here and therefore have no names in African languages. Three avenues are open to us in meeting these problems.

One may substitute the name of something else that may be called a cultural equivalent. That is, something that means about the same to our people of Africa as the original thing meant to the people of the Bible. This has the advantage of making some kind of sense to the reader. There is also the danger in following a course of substitution that some significant characteristic of the thing in the original may be overlooked. Some examples of this kind of substitution may help to clarify the method.

A word for incense had to be found. There are a number of sweet smelling barks and seeds in the Congo which the women have sometimes strung and worn around their necks like beads, but for the olfactory rather than the visual charm. The name for these has been extended to include the perfumes from Europe on sale for the natives. There is also the resin copal which has become widely known because of its commercial value. A term for incense has been constructed from these and has become firmly established in the language. It is literally 'perfumed copal'.

The raven which Noah sent from the ark is unknown here, and becomes in our translation the White-bellied African Crow. This is an example of a substitution being closely related zoologically to the original. But this is not always advisable. The wolf, for example, does not exist here, but its relative the jackal does and we have a name for it. But the jackal does not prey on domestic animals as the wolf did in Palestine, nor is he as fierce. The equivalent from these points of view is the leopard. Hence in Genesis 49 Benjamin is likened to a ravenous leopard, and the basic meaning is approached more closely than if we had been governed by scientific classification.

The 'firmament' in Genesis 1 gave us another problem. Its meaning in English is certainly not immediately obvious. The dictionary tells us that the Hebrew means something close to our English word 'expanse'. It seems, however, that the Hebrew idea may not always have been as abstract as that, for Isaiah says that the Lord "stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in". But the Greek word used in the Septuagint gives the idea of a firm and solid structure, and this is the idea that is carried out in our English word 'firmament'. Modern translations into English, Swedish, Norwegian and French take one or the other of these two leads. It is the predicament of the translator that he dare not hesitate too long between ideas. He must settle for one or the other and move on, and as Moffatt said in the introduction to his

famous translation, it sometimes makes the translator appear to be more dogmatic than he really is. In this case we tried to arrive at 'expanse' by the use of a word meaning 'width', but we found that it is not really understandable except as it is associated with the noun of which it indicates the width. It cannot be used alone. The word we finally used means 'surface', but it also has the idea of something stretched out or smoothed out. It is more concrete than we should like, but it does not require identity with a concrete object as does the word for 'width'.

Another method of dealing with these unknowns is to transliterate them, that is to take the Hebrew word (or Greek or French¹) and reproduce it letter for letter, but modifying it enough to make it pronounceable in Lingala. This method has the advantage of being an easy solution, and enables one to continue the translation almost without interruption. It also has the obvious disadvantage of not being immediately understood by the reader. It is, however, necessary where no equivalent is known. There are already many borrowings from the European languages which have established themselves as a part of the Lingala language and the Bible promises to make more. This is a phenomenon that is quite common in European languages too. I think it can be established, for instance, that the Swedish word *senap*, from the Greek word for mustard, came into the language by way of the Bible before the spice itself was much known in Sweden.

Since there is no animal in the Congo that even remotely resembles a camel, no substitution is possible, and we have used the transliteration *kamela*.

Another possible solution is to use the French word as it is. Since French is taught to some extent in all the primary schools, a limited vocabulary has become familiar to many, and the use of French is a time saver. This method is used very sparingly, every effort being made to keep the Lingala pure. One problem that remains unsolved may finally be clarified in this way. The cardinal points of the compass do not exist in Lingala and have therefore presented a real difficulty. We have begun by using the following equivalents: North — up river; South — down river; East — sunrise; West — sunset. The rivers of Congo flow in various directions, so this would be an impossible delineation in Congo, but if the orientation with the Jordan river is made, then the system becomes intelligible. This, however, presupposes the teaching of Bible geography. It may therefore be best to use the French words which are ordinarily taught in any French course.

II. Problems arising from language differences involve compromise for their solution. Someone must give up a local word or usage in favour of that which is more widely known. Lingala is a Bantu language, but since it is a trade language used over the whole navigable part of the Congo River, it comes into contact with many other languages and is influenced by them in matters both of vocabulary and cultural usage. For example, our field of mission work lies at the border between the Sudanic

¹ French is one of the official languages of the Congo.

and the Bantu language groups, but most of our people are Sudanic. Locally, therefore, certain Sudanic usages have come into Lingala. A case in point is that animals in Sudanic languages are treated as personal beings, and so in the local Lingala animals are designated by personal pronouns and pronominal prefixes to verbs. It seems clear, however, that this is not Bantu usage and is not considered correct in Bantu areas. The ruthless use of impersonal pronouns and prefixes is a bit shocking to Sudanic peoples, but it is a sacrifice they must make for a union Bible.

In Sudanic languages the seat of the emotions and thought life, the centre of personality, is not the heart, as in Bantu languages, but the liver. The psychological use of this term is rather more common than in English. Therefore, as Lingala came into the Sudanic area and the word *motema* was used in a figurative way every day, that word, which really means 'heart' came to mean 'liver' for the Sudanic peoples. But since it was the centre of the personality for each speaker, the discrepancy appears only in connection with its literal meaning. In the sacrifices in Exodus, however, the liver is frequently mentioned and again the Sudanic peoples must sacrifice a well known usage for something unfamiliar. The Lingala word for 'liver' has never come into current use in this area.

Most other differences are merely matters of vocabulary which are rapidly being overcome by increased communication.

III. Problems arising from the obscurity of the text itself or of the precise meaning of the text are more difficult for the missionary translator to solve.

To translate one must know the meaning. It is possible to write down word for word equivalents without much concern for over-all sense. This has been done at times in some of our English versions. But this is not really translating at all. The purpose must be to set down the meaning, if necessary even at the cost of a little departure from the words of the text. We must be as literal as possible, but our obligations are to sentences and paragraphs as well as to words.

Versions may vary greatly in their renderings of individual verses, but if there is a good majority on one side, and if the newer versions are nearly unanimous I have considered it safe to follow them. On the other hand there are times when there is nothing decisive in the comparison of the versions and the exegetical treatises point up the problems but do not solve them. In such cases the missionary translator is in need of some other authority.

The British and Foreign Bible Society accepts questions of this nature and refers them for expert treatment to Dr. W. D. McHardy, Professor of Old Testament Studies in the University of London. Here are a few of the problems in which he has given guidance. These are chosen from a larger number as illustrative of the different kinds of problems that have been submitted. Professor McHardy and the British and Foreign Bible Society have kindly permitted the use of these quotations even though the notes were not made for publication.

1. The King James Version uses the word 'and' not only as a connective, but as introducing new subject matter and new paragraphs. This

is translated literally from the Hebrew, but if it is awkward in English, it is more so in Lingala, and permission was sought to omit most of the occurrences of this word. Dr. McHardy replies:

"Certainly the conjunction *waw* before verbs and especially at the beginning of sentences may often be omitted as a Hebrew idiom. One cannot lay down a general rule for this but often it may be translated 'then', 'so', 'but', etc., as well as just being omitted. This will depend on the context in each case".

2. The word 'generation' usually presents no problem, but in Genesis 2 : 4 its use seems to be idiomatic and the versions reflect a bit of difference in translating it. Moffatt leaves it out and the others have rendered it variously as 'history', 'origins' and 'generations'. Dr. McHardy very helpfully replies as follows:

"Where the Hebrew word occurs with a proper name it means 'details about the man and his descendants'. By analogy it must mean, when applied to inanimate objects, 'details about those objects and what can be regarded as begotten by them', i.e. in this case 'the heavens and the earth and their contents' (literally, begettings). There is really no one English word. The clause might be expanded and rendered: 'Such in their creation were the heavens and the earth and what was in them' or 'Such when they were created were the heavens and the earth and what was in them'".

3. In Genesis 4: 8 some versions include the words "Let us go to the field" and some do not. The sense is certainly enhanced by their inclusion. Professor McHardy says: "These words ought to be accepted, because i) the Massoretic Text does not really make sense without them, ii) they have support from a strong group of versions and from the Samaritan, which is a form of the Hebrew, and iii) some Hebrew MSS actually leave a space here. Some English versions add 'out' after 'go', but this is inaccurate".

4. Genesis 6: 3 "My Spirit shall not always *strive* (or *abide*) with man". There is a sharp variation in the versions here. Dr. McHardy comments: "The verb occurs only here and the latest lexicon marks it 'unexplained'. On the whole it is perhaps best to render 'abide' as i) this suits the context, ii) it is the reading of some versions (Greek, Vulgate, Syriac, Targum-Onkelos), and iii) there is a possibility of explaining the Hebrew as cognate with an Assyrian root implying 'embodiment'. The meaning 'strive with' cannot be justified, and various conjectures which have been made need not be considered here".

5. Sometimes we are advised, for sufficient reasons, to stick rather closely to the Hebrew text even at the expense of some clarity, as in the case of the last part of Genesis 16: 13 on which Dr. McHardy says:

"The last part of the verse may be translated: 'Have I also (even) here seen after my see-er?' i.e. 'the one who sees me'. The word 'here' means 'hither'. Apart from that, the sense would be: in the desert, an unexpected place for such a vision, she had 'seen after' God, seen Him, not face to face, but after He had passed. The Revised Standard Version — 'Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?' cf.

Judges 13 : 22. This gives very good sense and fits the context neatly, *but* is based on three conjectural alterations in the Hebrew, in each case letters being regarded as having dropped out. As sense of a kind can be got from the present Hebrew text and as the emendations are conjectural and more than one has been proposed, probably the text should be retained — albeit reluctantly”.

6. Genesis 28 : 13 is easily understood but there is no unanimity as to whether God stood above the ladder or beside Jacob. Here Dr. McHardy says:

“The versions support the former but the latter is to be preferred, as i) ‘above it’ would probably be expressed differently, ii) there is less point in saying God was above the ladder and iii) one would expect a pronominal form (e.g. to him) after ‘said’ if ‘above it’ had been meant”.

7. In Genesis 47 : 21, did Joseph remove the people to the cities, as the Hebrew reads, or did he make slaves of them as some of the ancient versions indicate? Joseph’s agricultural programme (verse 23) does not seem compatible with removal to the cities. To this Dr. McHardy answers:

“The text as it stands can be translated, but the context and form of the sentence favour a parallel to the taking over of the land. Therefore read with the Samaritan-Hebrew and Greek: ‘and the people he made serve him as slaves’ ”.

The translation task is arduous, but the privilege is great beyond compare. Here a missionary feels he is in touch with the mainspring of missionary endeavour, and there is a corresponding sense of responsibility. It is one’s constant prayer that he be guided in handling aright the Word of Truth.

A Glimpse into the Workshop of a Bible Translator

Adolf Vielhauer

When on May 17th, 1903 the first Basel missionaries entered Bali, they began as soon as possible to do research on the Bali language, to learn it, to put it down in writing, to translate the most important Bible stories and passages, and to print them on a small printing press of their own. As the Bali and all the neighbouring tribes were illiterate, the missionaries had at the same time to start school teaching in order to spread the Word of God not only by word of mouth but to raise a new generation able to read the Holy Scriptures.

When as a result of the first World War we missionaries were kept away from the mission field for ten years (1915-1925), a collection of about one hundred and fifty stories from the Old and New Testament, with many Bible texts and passages added, had with great blessing continued the work among the people. Not only were the few Christians already gathered kept steadfast in faith, but many more were won in addition. After our return the research into the language and the trans-