

TRANSLATING HEBREW OLD TESTAMENT BOOK TITLES INTO THE YORUBA LANGUAGE OF NIGERIA

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Introduction

The African Regional Centre of the United Bible Societies reported that by 1980 Scriptures had been published in 499 African languages, comprising 241 with less than a New Testament, 156 New Testaments, and 102 Bibles. What seems disheartening and unbelievable is the fact that the entire Bible has been translated into only six per cent of the 1600 African languages and of this six per cent, the majority are “not easy to understand, accurate or clear translations of God’s words”. (Rachel Kanyoro, “A Proposal for Translation Research Strategy for Africa”, TBT, January 1983, page 101.)

The Yoruba translation is not exempted from this problem. Yoruba readers (especially non-English readers) constantly face unnecessarily meaningless Old Testament book titles. One purpose of this article is to show how inaccurate the Yoruba translations of some of the names of the Old Testament books are. More importantly, I want to suggest a better translation of some of the Old Testament book titles based upon an accurate translation of the original language of the Hebrew Old Testament, rather than on the transliteration of the Greek, Latin and English versions into Yoruba.

General comments on the translation of titles

On many occasions in translation work, some aspects of translation are regarded as not very important. But matters which seem small in translation can make a big difference in a new version of the Bible. An example of those small matters that could make a very big difference is the way in which the names of the Old Testament books have been translated into Yoruba.

In several translations, many important names given to the books of the Bible which have important and specific meanings were transliterated rather than translated. Such transliterations have made the readers face words which are meaningless. This is true of all available Yoruba translations. The names of the five books of the Pentateuch and Chronicles are examples:

Genesisi, Eksodu, Lefitiku, Numeri, Deuteronomi and Kronika.

Some of the other book titles have been given entirely wrong translations.

Transliteration rather than translation of those book titles which have the names of people is good because in both Hebrew and Yoruba, names have specific meanings and purposes. Therefore, any attempt to change these names to something different will be totally rejected by the people. Such proper names may be transliterated, but they should be spelled in accordance with Yoruba pronunciation.

A study of the transmission and translation of the Bible has shown that no one is really sure whether titles were given to all the books of the Bible in the original manuscripts. This is probably because the originals were lost long ago, and no one is actually in possession of them. For this reason, rabbinic scholars,

publishers, translators and users of the Bible have tried in various ways to supply freely any title that seems to fit. Various methods have been used to determine the name of each book, including names based upon the initial words, topics or events, literary types, prominent persons, contents, and authorship of the book.

Genesis

According to the early Hebrew practice of naming a document after the initial word or phrase of the document, what we know as Genesis today was called *bereshith*. It seems that Hebrew manuscripts and other editions of the Old Testament texts generally agree on this title. However, during the Talmudic period, it was known as the "Book of the Creation of the World".

The word *bereshith* has been translated in various ways. However, the most common translation is "In the beginning". While Spencer translated it "When God set about", Harrison thinks that the more accurate rendering is, "By way of beginning".

When Genesis was translated into Greek, in an attempt to give it a more imaginative name that would summarize the content or theme, it was given the name *Genesis* or *Genesis kosmou*, meaning "Creation" or "Creation of the World", rather than "beginning". This departure from the Hebrew practice of naming a document according to the first word or phrase was done throughout the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible). During the translation of the Greek Bible into Latin, the names of all the books of the Pentateuch were transliterated (except Numbers) instead of being translated into Latin. Then the English versions also transliterated the Latin titles so that most of the Bible names in the English Versions were actual copies of Latin, which in turn copied the Greek Bible.

Unfortunately, the Yoruba translators have done the same thing by transliterating instead of translating the English word "Genesis" into Yoruba language. Genesis is *Genesisi* in Yoruba. Genesis, as noted above, is the Greek word, which found its way into Latin, from Latin to English and from English to Yoruba. The unfortunate thing is that this word is meaningless to the Yorubas. This word "Genesis" has become part and parcel of the English language, and has become part of the English vocabulary. Thus, one can say, "This is the genesis of the problem". But such is not the case in Yoruba. This word has never become part of the Yoruba vocabulary. In Yoruba we cannot say, *genesisi isoro na*. It will not be understood by a non-English Yoruba speaker to mean "the beginning of the problem". If we were to translate the Greek title *Genesis* or *Genesis Kosmou*, we would say *ida* or *ida aye*. It is my opinion that a transliteration of Genesis to *Genesisi* is meaningless and inadequate. The Hebrew title *bereshith* is preferable, because the impact of the first word of Genesis has seldom been surpassed as a title for the entire book: *bereshith*, "In the beginning". There are several Yoruba words which are equivalent to the Hebrew title *bereshith*. Two phrases especially carry the full meaning—*Ni atetekose* and *Ni Ibere*. If, in the Yoruba Bible, Judges can be translated *Awon Onidajo*, which means "those who judge", I suggest that the word *Genesisi* could be replaced by either *Ibere* or *Atetekose*. Even though the first verse of Genesis in the Yoruba

Bible reads: *Ni atetekose Olorun da Orun ati aye*, the word *Ibere* seems to be simpler, more common, and is readily understood by common Yoruba speakers. The verb *bere* means “to start”, or “to begin”. Thus, we can say *bere ise re*, which means “start or begin your work”. A noun can be formed from the verb *bere* by adding the letter “i”: *i+bere (ibere)*, means “a beginning or a start”. *Ibere aye* means the beginning of the world. *Ibere Ohun ghogbo* means “the beginning of all things”. Instead of *Genesisi*, the title *Ibere aye* would be better.

Exodus

The Hebrew title of the second book of the Pentateuch is *we'elleh shemoth* or simply *shemoth*, which means “And these are names of”, or “names” when it is shortened. As is the common practice of the Hebrews, this title was taken from the opening phrase of the book of Exodus. The Greek translation (*LXX*) adopted a different name, *exodos*, in order to give a description of the content or theme. This word, which describes the “departure from Egypt” *exodos Aiguptou* is found in Exodus 19.1. The Greek title means the “going out” or “to go out”. A close examination of the contents of the book of Exodus shows that though the exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt occupies an important place in the book (as it does in the entire Old Testament), the name “Exodus” does not fully describe the entire contents of the book. The book also describes the event before the exodus journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai and the events which occurred there. If the Greek translators had translated or followed the Hebrew titles, the title of Exodus would have been *tauta ta onomata* or simply *onomata*. The Latin Vulgate (*Exodus*), the English (*Exodus*), and the Yoruba (*Eksodus*) versions transliterated, instead of translating, the Greek title. Like the word *Genesisi*, the word “Exodus” is meaningless in Yoruba. Though it has become an English word, which describes the content or central theme of the book of Exodus, it is strange and meaningless and describes nothing in Yoruba.

There are two ways for a more accurate rendering of the title of the book. A translator may choose to translate the Hebrew title *shemoth* (names), or to translate the meaning of the English transliteration of the Greek and Latin into Yoruba. If we follow the Hebrew title, the title of the book of Exodus in the Yoruba Bible would be *Awon Oruko*.

Oruko simply means a name. In order to form the plural, the word *Awon* is added to become *Awon Oruko*. But if we prefer the English transliteration of the Greek and Latin, the word “Exodus” could be translated *ijade*. Thus, the title of Exodus in the Yoruba Bible would be *Ijade*. The verb *jade* means “go out”. To form a noun, the letter “i” is the prefix added to make *Ijade*, meaning “the going out”. We may choose to use the Hebrew title on the basis of the fact that the Hebrew title is still in use today in the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, if we are translating from the Hebrew Bible into Yoruba, and not from the English Bible, the Hebrew title *shemoth* should be translated, rather than the English title. This may sound conservative or unscientific, yet this is one of the ways in which we can do justice to the Hebrew people and their culture. It is my opinion that we do not have to follow the English translation (though we can use it as an aid), when we are translating the Hebrew Old Testament into Yoruba.

Leviticus

The book of Leviticus is called *wayyiqra* in the Hebrew Bible. It means “and he called”. It was chosen as a title from the first word of the book of Leviticus following the common Hebrew practice. During the translation from Hebrew to Greek (*LXX*), the book was given a different title, *leitikon*. This was done in the light of the contents of the book. The contents may be described as “priest law”, “priest book”, and “law of the offerings”. Although the name “Levi” does not occur in the book of Leviticus (the term “Levites” only occurs in Lev 25.32,33), yet the Greek translation of the Hebrew titled this book *leitikon* because the priests whose work is described there were considered the descendants of the tribe of Levi. This name was transliterated from Greek to Latin, then from Latin to English and from English to Yoruba (*Lefitikus*). If a translator chooses to use the Hebrew title, it could be translated to *ipe* in Yoruba. The verb *pe* means “call” or “to call”. With the prefix “i”, it becomes a noun, *ipe*. *Ipe* means “calling”. However, using the English transliteration of the Greek and Latin, we face some problems of translation. This is because the word “Levi” is a name. One would be left to no other choice than to transliterate as it is, *Lefitiku*. The translators have to decide which one to use. However, the Hebrew title has a more equivalent word and meaning in Yoruba than the word Leviticus. Therefore, *Ipe* would be more suitable as the title of Leviticus, following the Hebrew title.

Numbers

The title of Numbers in the Hebrew Bible is *bemidbar* which means “in the desert”. This is the fifth word in the Hebrew text. The Greek Version gave it the title *Arithmoi* meaning “numbers”. This title was given because of the census or numbering of Israelites during the wilderness wandering. This variation from the Hebrew title was also an attempt to describe the content of the book.

While the Latin Version (Vulgate) latinized the Greek titles of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, it translated the Greek title *Arithmoi* to the Latin word *Numeri*, meaning “Numbers”. The English Versions also departed from their usual practice of transliterating the latinized title, and translated it. The Authorized Version, the Revised Version, and the Revised Standard Version have the title “The Fourth Book of Moses Commonly Called Numbers”. The American Version omits part of this and simply translates the Latin title to “Numbers”. The Yoruba Versions have also departed from their usual practice of transliterating the English title. The translators bypassed the English title and instead transliterated the Latin title directly. So the title of the Yoruba Version is *Numeri* (the same spelling as the Latin title).

The Greek word, *Arithmoi*, the Latin, *Numeri* and the English title “Numbers” could be translated as *Iye* in Yoruba. The correct title in the Yoruba Versions would be *Ikaye*, or *Iye*, if these Greek, Latin and English titles were translated. *Iye* is a noun, which means “Number”. *Kaye* means “to number” or “to court”. *Ikaye* could therefore mean “counting” or “census”. However, as far as the contents of the book of Numbers are concerned, it seems as if the Greek, Latin, English and Yoruba titles are not aptly chosen, because only a small portion (1.1–4.26) of the book deals with the numbering of Israel. Though the

Hebrew title *bemidbar* (“In the Wilderness”) is not chosen for the reason of the contents, it appears to be more appropriate, since almost all the events described in the book took place in the wilderness. Therefore, I would prefer the use of the translation of the Hebrew title (“In the Wilderness”) for the Yoruba Version. The word *bemidbar* can be translated *Ni aginju* in Yoruba. What appears to be the closest title to the Hebrew would be the word *Aginju*. It simple means “Wilderness”.

Deuteronomy

The book of Deuteronomy in the Hebrew Bible was given the name *elleh haddebarim* (“these are the words”) or simply *debarim* (“words”), based on the first two words in the text. Among the Hebrews it was also known as *mishneh hattōrah* (“the repetition of the law”) or simply *mishneh* (“repetition”). The Greek title *deuteronomion touto* was based on the mistranslation of the Hebrew *misnheh hattorah hazzoth* in Deuteronomy 17.18. The Greek word *deuteronomion* means “the second law”. This title was chosen by the Septuagint, probably because the Law in Exodus was considered the first law and that of Deuteronomy, the second. However, the problem concerning the relationship of the law in Deuteronomy to that of Exodus still remains. The English Versions anglicized the Latin title (*Deuteronomium*), which was just a transliteration of the Greek. The Yoruba Versions did the same and called it *Deuteronomi*.

The correct translation of Deuteronomy in Yoruba would be *Ofin Keji*. It literally means “the second law”. However this translation is inappropriate in Yoruba, because it gives the impression to the Yoruba speaker that the book of Deuteronomy is another law different from that of Exodus. A better title in Yoruba would either be *Atunso Ofin* (“repetition of the law”), or *Iranti Oro Ofin* (“remembrance of the Words of the Law”). Any of these Yoruba titles would do justice to both the Hebrew title and the Greek title, since the Hebrew title is the same as *Oro*, or “repetition of the Law”, and the English title also means the “Second Law”. The meaningless transliteration should be avoided if possible.

Chronicles

The title of the book of Chronicles in the Hebrew Bible is *dibre hayyamim* which means “The daily events” or “The words of the days” understood as the recorded accounts of events. While the present books of Chronicles are one volume in the Hebrew text, the Septuagint divided this into two and gave it the name *Paraleipomenōn* meaning “things omitted”. This probably refers to things that the book of Kings and Samuel omitted. Originally, some manuscripts titled it *Paraleipomenōn basileōn Iouda* (“Things omitted concerning the Kings of Judah”), but other old manuscripts omitted the last two words. While in the Hebrew canon, the book of Chronicles was put at the end of the canonical books, the Septuagint placed it between Kings and Ezra-Nehemiah, probably because of the historical nature of the content. The English title “Chronicles” has come

from Jerome's suggested title "A Chronicle of the whole sacred history". The Yoruba Versions took over this title (*Kronika*), along with the division into two and its place in the Old Testament (*Ekini ati Ekeji Kronika*). The transliteration *Kronika* has no meaning in Yoruba. The English Versions were right to adopt Jerome's suggested title rather than that of the Alexandrian translators. What I consider the closest possible equivalent to both the Hebrew title "Daily Events", and "Chronicles" is *Ise Ojo* or *Akosile Ise Ojo*. *Ise Ojo* means "Daily Acts" or "Daily Events". *Akosile Ise Ojo* means "Recorded Daily Events". Any of the above would certainly convey the meaning of "Chronicles" or *dibre hayyamim* and the nature of the book of Chronicles.

Psalms

The Hebrew title of the entire book of Psalms was *sepher tehillim*, or simply *tehillim* ("The Book of Praises" or "Praises"). Several of the Greek manuscripts of Psalms have the title *Psalmoi* and *Psalterion*. *Psalmoi* denotes "the music of a stringed instrument", or a song sang to the accompaniment of a musical instrument. The word *Psalterion* referred to a stringed instrument in its original meaning. It later came to mean "a collection of songs" and was used as the title of the book of Psalms by Codex Alexandrinus (one of the early NT manuscripts). The Alexandrian translators probably translated the Hebrew word *mizmôr* (religious song accompanied by a stringed instrument), which occurs about fifty-seven times as the title of individual Psalms to describe the form of the book rather than the contents. The Vulgate latinized the Greek titles and called the book *Psalmi* or *Psalterium*. The Latin word *Psalmi* was then transliterated in English Versions. The Yoruba title *Orin Dafidi* is a translation of "Psalms" with the addition of "David". It simply means "The Song of David". This Yoruba title is very misleading. It gives the Yoruba readers the impression that David wrote the whole book of Psalms. This title was probably chosen because of the word *ledawid* ("to David"), which occurs at the top of several early chapters of Psalms. Perhaps it was wrongly understood by the Yoruba translators to mean that David was the author of Psalms. Scholars agree that the word can mean either "of David" or "for David", and that it does not necessarily mean that David was the author. The best possible explanation is that the chapters where such titles occur probably belong to the Davidic Collection. While the Greek title described the form of the book, the Hebrew title described most of the contents of the book of Psalms. Since the Hebrew title *tehillim* (though it occurs only once in Psalms) described the content of the book rather than the form, this title is probably more appropriate. On this basis, the Yoruba translators should translate the Hebrew title rather than the latinized English title. Then what appears to be the best possible equivalent would be *Orin Iyin* or *Iyin* instead of *Orin Dafidi*. *Orin Iyin* means "Song of Praise" and *Iyin* simply means "Praise". However, *Orin Iyin* would seem to be preferable.

Other Old Testament titles that need some close examination are Lamentations, Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes.

Conclusion

To carry out changes such as those above in the translation of the Yoruba Bible, we would be bound to face several problems. There would be the problem of financing the project, and finding good translators who understand Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Yoruba, and are capable of doing competent research in these languages. Another major problem would be the conservative, dominant, cultural idea that age is to be the most important factor in choosing translators. "The old man knows the language well," they say. The result of such a statement is always that the old men who have reached retirement age are chosen, as if the translation of the Bible is a simple job that only tired old men can do whenever they have a little energy.

What seems to be another major problem (probably the greatest) is the "conservative opposition to new ways of translating, and the unquestioning acceptance, especially by the Church's leaders, of the old, inaccurate translation, simply because it has won the respect of the people" (Rachel Kanyoro, in the article quoted above). This leads to the Church's refusal to support any new translation proposed. What we hear are such ill-informed statements as: "A curse is pronounced on people who change or add to the Holy Bible." "Now they want to change the Bible." "If the King James Version was good for Paul, it is good for me." I met an example of this type of attitude in December 1981 in Lagos, Nigeria. While discussing with a prominent Church minister about the possibility of doing research on a better translation of the Bible directly from the original languages into Yoruba, the prominent Church leader said, *Enyin ti e npe ara nyin ni* "Scholars" *lonyi Oro Olorun*. (You so-called "Scholars" are changing the word of God). Then he continued in English, "You are going to have the worst translation."

No matter how strong this type of conservatism, Yoruba biblical scholars who understand original languages are required to provide the most accurate translation possible of the Yoruba Bible for Yoruba readers. In this gigantic task of translation, a knowledge of the original languages should not be made secondary in choosing translators. And educated young men who are competent in those languages should not be disqualified either because of their age or lack of long contact with the local language or people.

Translation of the titles of Old Testament books is just one example of how a fresh approach to translation is needed for the sake of readers of Yoruba.